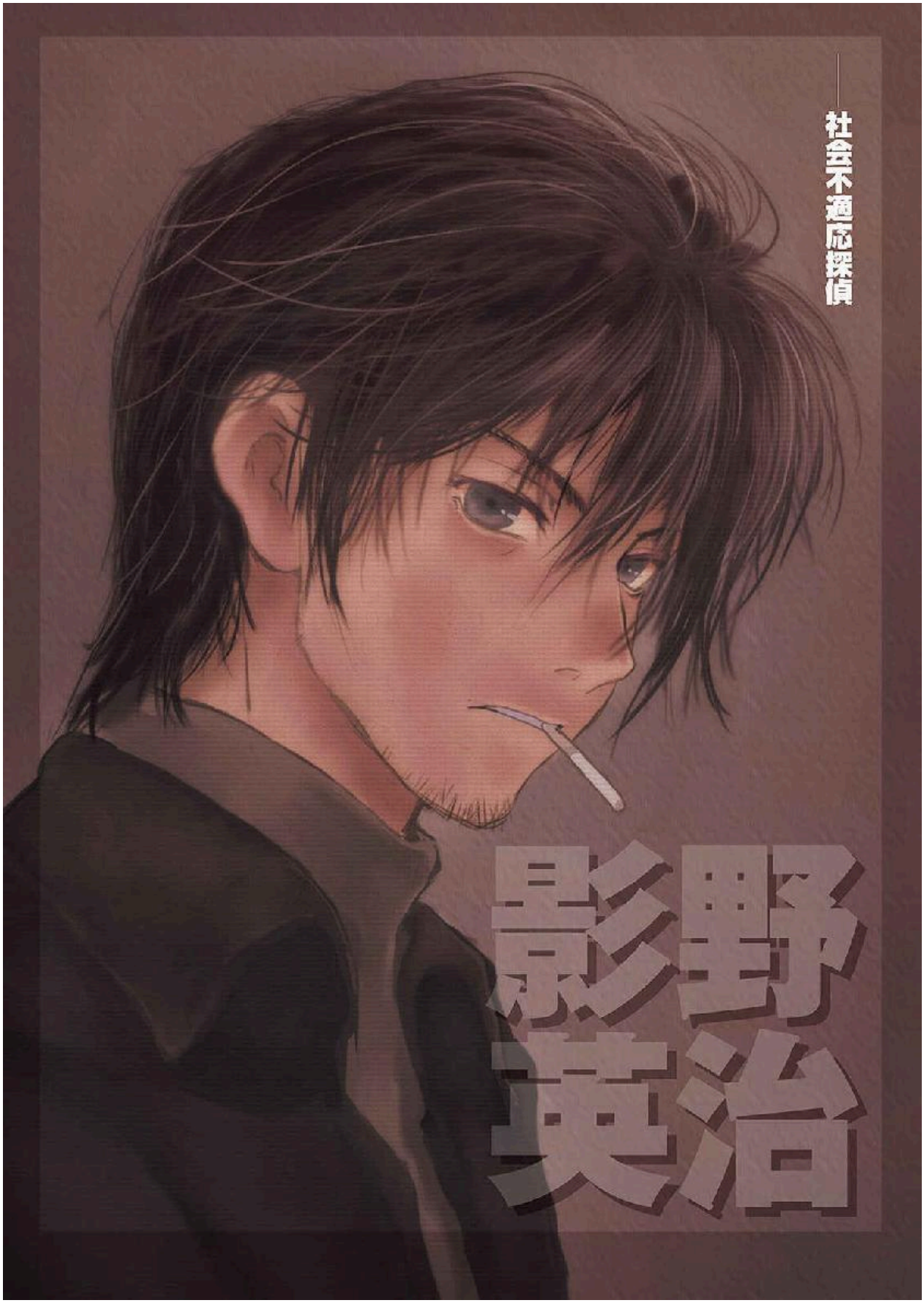
タクティカル ジャッジメント 8
Tactical Judgment
自業自得のクリスマス!
Toru Shiwasu
師走トオル
FUJIMI
MYSTERY
BUNKO

Tactical
Judgment

妄想中
これだ。
完璧だよ。
雪奈はいろんな意味で
メロメロになるに違いない！
ぐふはははは！


社会不適応探偵
影野寅治

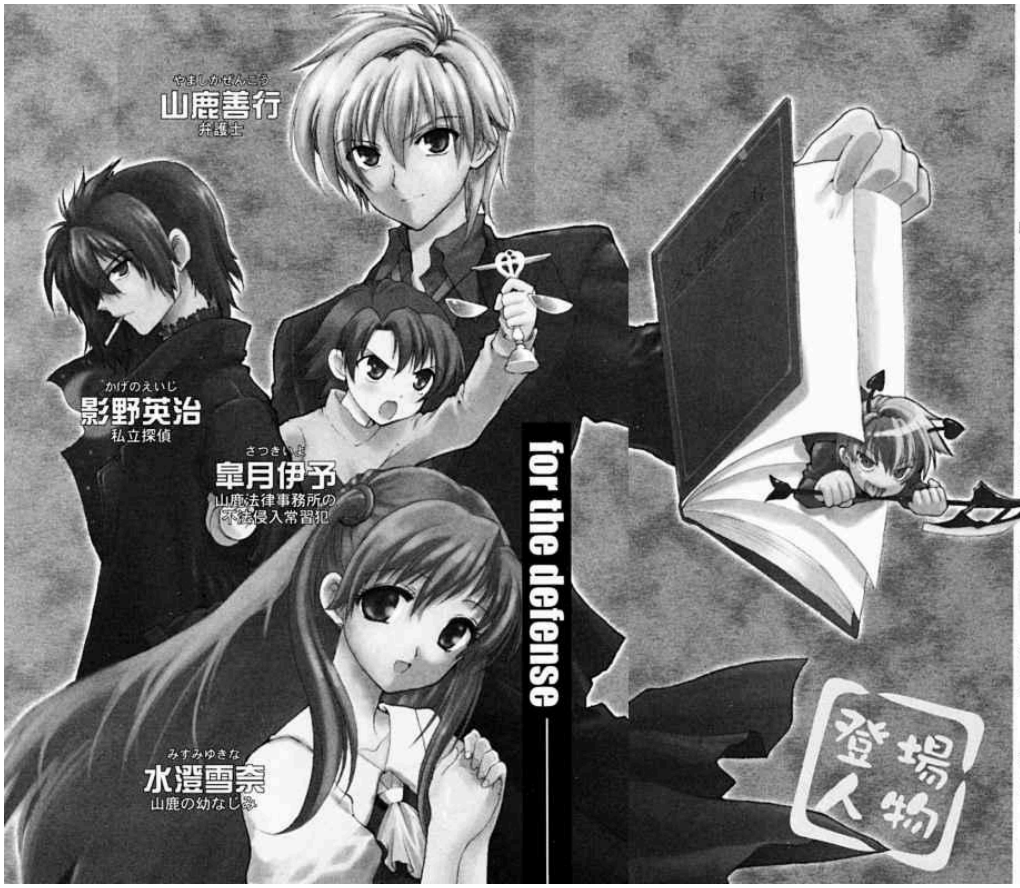
Tactical Judgment Vol 8: Christmas' Just Deserts!

By Toru Shiwasu

Translated by waifutime

Proofreading by aceattorneydude

Prologue: The Resistance Movement of a Certain Communist	**10**
Chapter 1: Reaping What You Sow	**47**
Chapter 2: Christmas Trial	**65**
Chapter 3: A Certain Lawyer's Guerrilla Activity	**107**
Chapter 4: The Truth Is Always Only One	**123**
Epilogue: The Desperate Struggle of a Certain Communist	**162**
Afterword	**166**



for the prosecution guest

堀内健一
検事
毎度、山鹿に泣かされる。得意な言葉は「異議あり」

羽田修甲
若造刑事
因幡の部下。今回、事件をスピード解決して得意満面

因幡健
殺人課の刑事
コワモテのベテラン刑事。けっこう有能

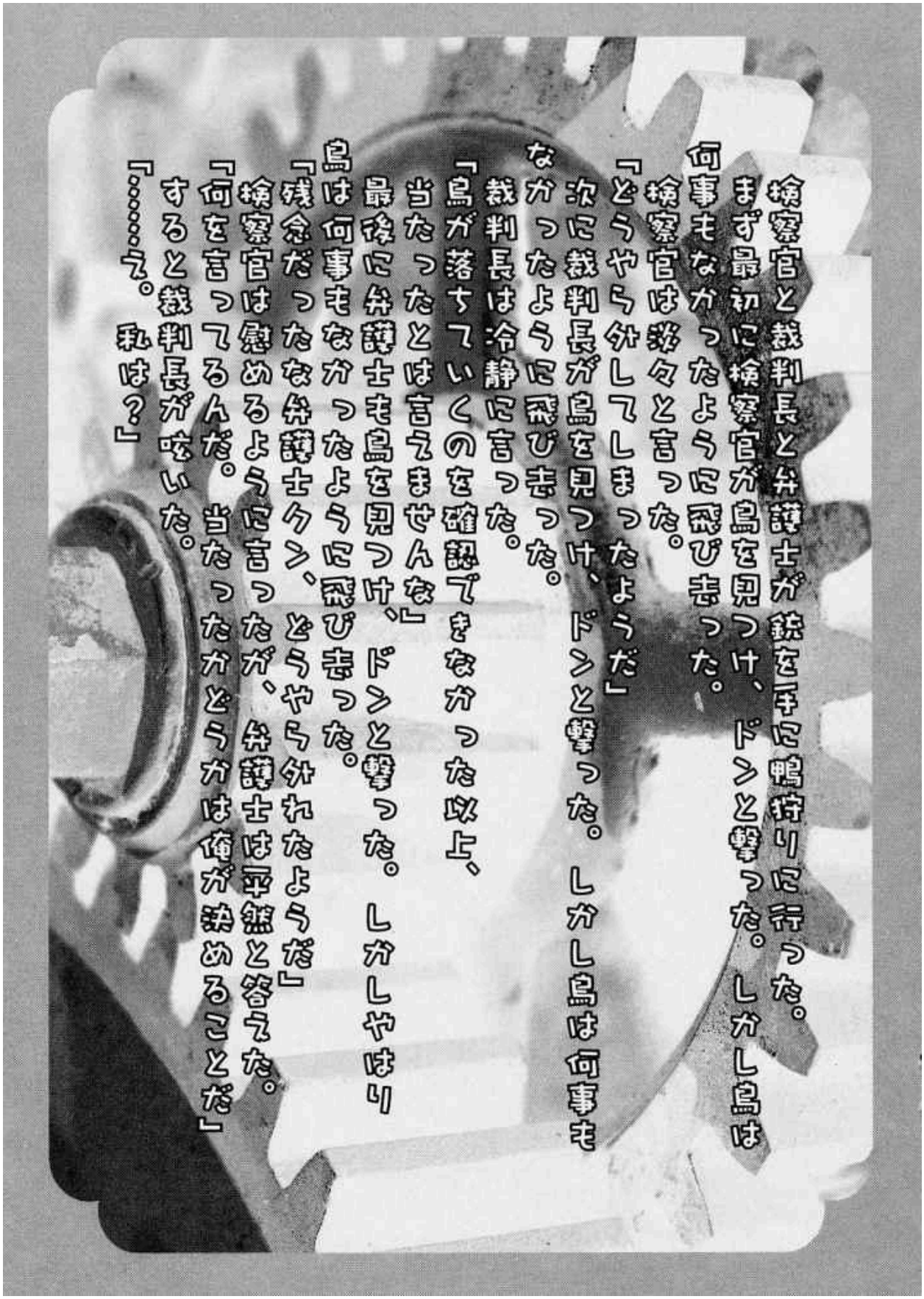
海老山春彦
自由経済党の衆議院議員。息子が起こした事件をもみ消そうと山鹿事務所を訪れる

海老山秋男
海老山春彦の息子。大学生。殺人の容疑で起訴される。気が短い

蟹丘裕信
海老山秋男の友人。秋男とともに殺人事件に巻き込まれる

貝柴伸
銃の売人。海老山秋男に、5万円で実銃での試射をさせようとする

烏賊村博
探偵


検察官と裁判長と弁護士が銃を手に鴨狩りに行った。
まず最初に検察官が鳥を見つけ、ドンと撃った。しかし鳥は
何事もなかったように飛び去った。
検察官は淡々と言った。
「どうやら外してしまったようだ」
次に裁判長が鳥を見つけ、ドンと撃った。しかし鳥は何事も
なかったように飛び去った。
裁判長は冷静に言った。
「鳥が落ちていくのを確認できなかった以上、
当たったとは言えませんな」
最後に弁護士も鳥を見つけ、ドンと撃った。しかしやはり
鳥は何事もなかったように飛び去った。
「残念だったな弁護士クン、どうやら外れたようだ」
検察官は慰めるように言ったが、弁護士は平然と答えた。
「何を言ってるんだ。当たったかどうかは俺が決めることだ」
すると裁判長が呟いた。
「……え。私は？」

A prosecutor, a judge, and a lawyer went duck hunting together.
First, the prosecutor spotted a duck and fired a shot. Bang! However, the duck flew away as if nothing had happened.
The prosecutor calmly said,
"Looks like I missed."
Next, the judge spotted a duck and fired. Bang! However, the duck also flew away as if nothing had happened.
The judge coolly remarked,
"Since I couldn't confirm the duck falling, I cannot say I hit it."
Finally, the lawyer spotted a duck and fired. Bang! However, the duck again flew away as if nothing had happened.
"Too bad, lawyer, old chap. Seems like you missed," the prosecutor said sympathetically.
But the lawyer, unfazed, replied,
"What are you talking about? Whether I hit or missed is for me to decide."
The judge murmured under his breath,
"... Uh, what about me?"

序章
とある共産主義者の抵抗運動

Prologue: The Resistance Movement of a Certain Communist

It was an evening, two days before Christmas Eve.

There's a japanese song called "Snail."

It starts with "Little snail ♪" and is a simple song that everyone knows.

This song was created more than fifty years before I was born, and it's said to be one of the songs made for children's music education by the Ministry of Education. However, due to unclear circumstances, the lyricist and composer of the song remain unknown.

Now then. In front of me, there's a lawyer. He's sitting at his desk, his feet propped up, reading a book with a lazy, spaced-out expression. That slovenly attitude doesn't make him look like a lawyer at all, but the world is a strange place, and somehow, even someone like him is indeed a lawyer.

The man's name is Zenko Yamashika. In the world of criminal trials, he's a famous lawyer, to the point where people say that if you don't know his name, you're not in the business.

However—when it comes to "fame," there are two kinds of fame. To put it simply, you can either be famously good or famously bad.

So, which one is this lawyer? Although I personally find it rather unpleasant, it seems the world considers him to be on the "good" side. After all, he's taken on numerous cases of unfortunate clients falsely accused of crimes, and in every single one, he's won acquittals.

But I know the truth.

That lousy lawyer will ruthlessly attack any witness to win, even if that witness is a completely honest and truthful person.

That corrupt lawyer will use any means necessary to win, even if it involves methods bordering on criminal acts.

Now then.

It's a bit sudden, but I've decided to give this lawyer a little gift in the form of a song. The composer is unknown, but the lyrics are by me—Iyo Satsuki.

Ahem.

“Lii-i-it, t-l-e-e, la-a-a-w, ye-e-e-er, Ze-e-en-ko-o- ♪”

The wicked lawyer twitched for just a moment.

“Where is your mo-o-o-ral compa-a-ass?”

A vein began to throb at his temple.

“Lies and deceit, manipula-a-ate the truth ♪”

Bang! Zenko slammed his palm down on the desk.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up! What the hell are you doing, suddenly bursting into some weird and ridiculous song!? Have you finally lost your mind?! Take that nonsense outside!”

“What’s your problem? I’m being generous enough to let you hear my beautiful voice. Normally, I’d charge you for this.”

“Who in their right mind would pay for such a song, you scam artist! Anyway, I’m busy right now—be quiet!”

“Hmph!”

And with that, Zenko went back to his reading. Unfortunately, it seems my plan hasn’t had much success so far.

Now then. There’s a reason I suddenly burst into song.

The book Zenko is reading—that’s the reason. The title is “How to Enjoy Christmas.” It’s a title that couldn’t be more ill-suited for a shady lawyer like him, more suited for a con artist than a lawyer.

Now, I should talk about a person named Yukina Misumi.

She’s a 19-year-old college student, kind-hearted and liked by everyone, and on top of that, she’s beautiful. To me, she’s like an older sister.

She had some dealings with Zenko a while back, and now she’s working at his office as something of a secretary. Though, since she’s also juggling her university studies, she’s not at the office all the time, as is the case right now.

However, this recluse of a lawyer seems to have misunderstood the situation, and he's convinced that Yukina has feelings for him because she's often around him. Yukina, on the other hand, is the type who can't easily refuse people, so she can't outright reject Zenko, either.

Now then. As Christmas is fast approaching, Zenko's been acting strange lately, and seeing him reading that Christmas guidebook, along with some things Yukina herself has mentioned, it seems that the sleazy lawyer is planning to go on a date with Yukina on Christmas Eve.

Yukina going on a date with Zenko on Christmas Eve? That's outrageous. There's no way Yukina would invite him on a date, so it must be Zenko, abusing his position as her employer, saying something like, "If you don't want to lose your job, you'll go on a date with me, mwahaha!"

If Yukina spends the night with that corrupt lawyer Zenko, there's no telling what kind of horrible things might happen. At this point, it's safe to say that Yukina's purity is in my hands. That's why I must do whatever it takes to thwart Zenko's scheme. The song I sang earlier, "Zenko's Song," was just one of my attempts to break his concentration.

However, it's clear that a song or two won't be enough to derail Zenko's plans. I'll have to come up with another strategy.

"Damn, I'm a bit over budget. That last case didn't bring in much money…"

Zenko was muttering complaints to himself. Seems like he's planning to spend big on a fancy restaurant or maybe even a high-end hotel. That sleazy lawyer—if only he'd go bankrupt, the world would be a slightly more peaceful place.

In the first place, the idea of Zenko walking around with a woman on Christmas Eve is a mismatch. It's like imagining the great Lenin and Bush walking side by side. At best, Zenko should be the kind of guy who walks between couples holding hands and annoys them. Even I can only spend Christmas Eve with my parents and younger brother!

"Hey, shitty brat."

Suddenly, Zenko called out to me.

"What? I'm in the middle of thinking about something important! Don't bother me!"

"Shut up. I don't care about that. It's already six o'clock. How long are you planning to stay here? Go home and go to bed, kid."

Hmm. So, he's finally trying to kick me out. But I'm not going to let him get his way that easily.

“I’m fine. My parents are out celebrating their wedding anniversary tonight, and they left their darling daughter all alone. There’s no dinner waiting for me at home, so I’ve arranged for Yukina to make dinner for me here tonight.”

A vein bulged in Zenko’s temple.

“Don’t mess with me! Yukina won’t be here until after eight! Go home and eat a convenience store lunch or something!”

There’s no way I’m letting Yukina and that beast of a lawyer be alone in this cramped office late into the night. I’ll have to stay here and keep them from being alone together as long as possible.

Just then, the phone rang. It wasn’t the phone—it was the intercom. Someone was at the building’s entrance, calling up from the first floor.

Since ignoring it would only make the ringing continue, Zenko reluctantly picked up the receiver.

“Yes, this is the Yamashika Law Office… Huh? No, I’m sorry, but we’ve already closed for the day. If you have business, please make an appointment for tomorrow… Huh? No, as I said, we’re closed for the day. Huh? …I see.”

It seemed like a persistent and pushy client, as Zenko continued the conversation with a sour expression on his face. I thought for sure he’d refuse them to the end because it was too much trouble—but…

"…I understand. In that case, I can offer legal consultation only. However, since it’s after business hours, there will be an extra charge."

Unusually, my prediction was wrong.

…Ah, that’s right. He was just complaining about being short on money earlier, so it seems he’s planning to make some extra cash for Christmas. This shameless guy.

But, I’m not going to let him get away with it—I’d love to say that, but I’m also curious about what kind of consultation someone would come for at such a time, without an appointment.

No matter what I say, watching Zenko’s courtroom performances isn’t all that bad if you view them as comedy. After all, the reason I come to this cramped, dirty office every day is to witness Zenko’s wicked schemes in action.

But then again...

I had no idea that this legal consultation would eventually develop into such a big—no, ridiculous—case.

…Doesn't that sound pretty cool, the way I put it?

◆

Eventually, three clients entered the office.

It was a rather strange combination. Two of them were young men, probably university students. The third was a man in his fifties.

It seemed like the older man and one of the young men were probably father and son. Their eyes, the shape of their noses, and their sturdy builds were strikingly similar. However, there didn't seem to be any connection with the other young man. His square face, thick arms, and legs were more fittingly described as stocky rather than muscular. On top of that, compared to the other two, he looked quite uneasy, as if he wasn't used to being in such a place.

There was one more thing that caught my attention. The two young men were injured. The stocky one had what appeared to be a bruise from being punched on his face, and the other one, who seemed to be the older man's son, had bruises all over his face and had been pressing a handkerchief to a spot just above his left temple for a while now. To add to that, the handkerchief was already stained bright red.

What could they possibly be here to consult about? Surely, they didn't come to this infamous office to settle a street fight or something.

As I puzzled over it, looking from one client to another—

I suddenly realized. I recognized the older man's face.

"Aaaaah!"

Before I knew it, I was pointing and shouting.

"That guy! He's Haruhiko Ebiyama from the Liberal Economic Party!"

"…What did you say?"

Even Zenko raised his eyebrows in surprise.

The Liberal Economic Party. It's the ruling party, well-known to every Japanese citizen, and a group of capitalists' lapdogs.

As for Haruhiko Ebiyama of the Liberal Economic Party—well, he's not particularly important. He doesn't hold any significant positions, and you rarely see him on TV. He's just a minor politician. However, he is a member of the House of Representatives from this town, and there was a chance that in the future, I might end up competing with him for a seat, so I remembered his face.

"Yes, it's as the young lady says. I am Haruhiko Ebiyama of the Liberal Economic Party…"

Haruhiko Ebiyama answered with a hint of pride.

"I see. Well, please, have a seat. Let's hear what you have to say."

Perhaps because he realized his client was a member of the National Diet, Zenko's previously rude attitude vanished, and he suddenly became very polite, offering the three of them seats on the sofa.

After all, Zenko is a man who loves power and money. When a client who possesses both shows up, for him it's like 'along comes a sucker just begging to be parted from his money.'

"First of all, I must apologize," Haruhiko Ebiyama said. "We barged in without an appointment."

"No, no—" Zenko glanced at the two injured men. "Well, it seems like you're in quite a rush, given that you didn't even have time to see a doctor."

"Yes, you're right. We've gotten caught up in quite a troublesome situation."

"I see. However, one of you has a head wound. Wouldn't it be better to seek medical attention first?"

"No, no! If we go wandering around, we might run into a police officer who'll start asking questions about the injuries. I'm sure you understand how troublesome that would be."

I see. If a police officer saw them bleeding like that, they definitely wouldn't be allowed to just walk away. Even if they managed to make it to a hospital, there's no guarantee the doctor wouldn't report it.

"Understood. How about this: I know a doctor. Well, his skills are… Anyway, he has a proper medical license, and he's discreet. If I call him here, I'm sure he can help without leaving a formal record. But since it'll be an off-the-books treatment, it'll be a bit expensive."

“…I see. That’s an appealing offer, and we’d really appreciate it, but, uh, are you sure about his skills?”

“Oh, yes, I’m sure. After all, he has a legitimate medical license and plenty of experience performing surgeries on numerous patients every day. And besides, it’s not like I’m the one who’s going to be treated.”

“…What?”

“Oh, no, no, never mind. I was just joking. Anyway, don’t worry, it’ll be fine.”

“I… I see. Well, we have some cash on hand, so please go ahead and make the arrangements.”

“Understood. Excuse me for a moment.”

Zenko took out his cell phone and made a call.

There’s only one person in this world who fits the description of Zenko’s shady acquaintance, a doctor who cuts people up every day.

“Hello, it’s me, Yamashika. I know it’s sudden, but Ujigami, you could use some extra money, right? There’s a client at my office with a bit of a situation. …Yeah, yeah, something like that. I’ll take a 20% cut for brokering the deal. …What? You think that’s too much? Shut up. The client’s got something to hide and plenty of cash. They’ll pay whatever you ask. Alright, make it quick.”

“...”

The faces of the three clients stiffened.

He really ought to be more discreet about having conversations like that in front of the clients.

“Okay, everything’s set, Mr. Ebiyama. He’ll be here shortly.”

“I… I see. Thanks.”

Ebiyama’s face was a little stiff, but maybe because he had something to hide, he didn’t protest. That’s exactly the kind of attitude that makes people like him easy prey for lawyers.

“Well then, while we wait for the doctor, why don’t you tell me what this is all about? What brings you here?”

“Ah… Yes, of course. That’s why we came in the first place, but…”

For some reason, instead of answering, Ebiyama glanced over at me. It seemed he was reluctant to discuss anything too dark in front of an innocent, pure-hearted girl like me.

“Oh, I see,” Zenko said, also turning to me. “Hey, this is a private conversation between a lawyer and his client. You outsider, go wait over there.”

Irritated.

“What’s with that attitude?! I’m part of this office too, aren’t I?!”

“What are you talking about, you trespasser? When it comes to conversations between a lawyer and a client, attorney-client privilege is guaranteed, but if a third party is present, things get complicated. Get out of here.”

“Hmph, fine, Zenko, you jerk.”

Still, out of respect for Ebiyama’s consideration in not wanting me to hear any unsavory details, I decided to comply for now.

I grudgingly retreated into the adjacent room.

But still, I know something. This adjacent room, which Zenko uses to sleep in, isn’t exactly soundproof.

So, for example, if I press my ear against the wall like this...

"My apologies. You see, that girl has a history of shoplifting, so we’re giving her some experience in society to help rehabilitate her."

Zenko's ridiculous voice could be heard all too well through the setup. Ugh, who’s the shoplifter here?! I’ll put a thumbtack in his shoes next time.

"Now then, let’s get to the point… No, perhaps introductions are in order first. I understand who you are. So, the two young men with you… are they both your sons?"

"Err, one of them is indeed my son, Akio. As for the other, he’s a friend of my son’s… Oh, excuse me, what was your name again?"

"Hironobu Kanioka."

A different voice chimed in. Judging from the somewhat reserved tone, it was undoubtedly the stockier, quieter one of the two young men.

Still, Ebiyama’s friend being named Kanioka? In japanese, "ebi" means "shrimp" and "kani", "crab". So, we’ve got a shrimp and crab connection? …No, that’s just a coincidence.

"I see. Based on the circumstances, it seems like this consultation is about your son. He’s injured, after all. What exactly happened?"

"Well, you see…"

There was a brief pause, as if it was difficult for him to say.

"My foolish son… seems to have shot someone with a handgun."

Oh dear.

That’s quite the shock. For an ordinary young man to shoot someone with a handgun, especially in Japan, is no small matter. If it were a shotgun or a hunting rifle, maybe, but handguns aren’t something regular people can get their hands on.

"Your son isn’t a police officer or anything… judging by appearances, at least."

"No, he’s just an ordinary university student."

"But then, how on earth did he manage to acquire a handgun?"

"Well… Akio, tell the truth."

"Uh, alright."

Urged by his father, a voice that must have belonged to Akio started speaking. Maybe it was because his father was a member of the Diet, but he sounded a bit pompous.

"About a week ago, I was browsing some underground sites on the internet."

Underground sites. Basically, places where you can find all kinds of information that can’t be made public, like bookstores selling first editions of Mao Zedong’s writings, or meetings of communists.

"Then, three days ago, I met a gun dealer in a live chat."

Live chat. The kind where you talk with your voice instead of typing.

"I see. So, you bought the gun from that dealer?"

"N-No! I didn't actually buy it. I never wanted to own a handgun; I was just curious about them. Then, the dealer suggested that if I paid a little, he'd let me fire the gun in a deserted area. So, I…"

Akio Ebiyama continued mumbling something inaudible. He was probably just stringing together a bunch of excuses.

But still, why do men always want to shoot guns? It's just a tube that fires chunks of metal—dangerous and nothing more. If they have that much passion, they should channel it into realizing true communism or something more productive.

"I see. So, essentially, you paid the gun dealer to let you try shooting a gun?"

Zenko, seemingly growing impatient, summarized the story and moved things along.

"…Well, yes, that's basically it."

"I see. And then?"

"I went to meet the dealer. Hironobu came with me."

"And something went wrong there?"

"Yes, well…"

"Where did you meet him?"

"There's this place called Ryugu Dam, a bit out in the countryside. Do you know it?"

"Yes, I'm familiar with it."

Ryugu Dam. It's a reservoir that supplies water to the entire area. If the roads are clear, you can get there in about thirty minutes by car.

"The deal was set to take place there—or rather, we were the ones who suggested the location. The dealer asked if we knew of any isolated spots, and I happened to know about a small campground near the dam that wouldn't be in use this time of year—"

After that, Ebiyama and Kanioka took turns explaining what had happened.

To summarize: the two of them arrived at Ryugu Dam around 5 PM today. At that time of year, 5 PM in the mountains, far from any streetlights, means it's already pitch black. Moreover, there

are no houses near Ryugu Dam, and since it's off the main highway, not many cars pass by either.

In such a place, the Shrimp-Crab Duo met the dealer.

The dealer didn't reveal his real name and insisted on being called "Dealer." Well, it's not like someone involved in illegal gun sales would willingly disclose their identity. Apparently, he looked like a total yakuza. Big build, sharp eyes. I can picture it easily enough.

They were eager to fire the gun right away, but there's the sad reality of being sheltered university students. After all, it was a handgun—an illegal item. You'd think they'd realize the risks before heading to an isolated location, but no. There's no way a dealer who's willing to casually let you fire an illegal gun is going to be a decent person.

And so, the rich kid and his friend found themselves in a very disadvantageous negotiation on the edge of that dam, where no one was around.

Initially, they agreed to pay 300 dollars to fire 50 rounds. That's 6 dollars per shot. Honestly, with that kind of money, they could've gone to Guam and fired some rounds, but I digress. As the son of a Diet member, he probably had more pocket money than he knew what to do with.

However, when it came time to hand over the gun, the dealer showed his true colors. He claimed that the 300 dollars was just for the bullets, and that they'd need to pay another 300 dollars to rent the handgun itself.

Suddenly, the price had doubled. Naturally, this led to an argument. But even with both of them protesting, the dealer—clearly not one to back down—didn't budge. Akio, who seemed to have a short temper, finally lost his cool and said they were leaving, that the deal was off.

Of course, the dealer couldn't just let them walk away, as that would mean a huge loss for him. So, he took the most logical step, given the situation. He pointed the gun at them and said, "Don't think you're walking away from this—"

◆

"I see. Sounds like you've had quite the experience," Zenko said, with absolutely no sympathy in his voice. "Judging by the fact that both of you are injured, I take it you didn't comply right away. I assume there was some kind of struggle?"

"…Yes," the Diet member's son said, grimacing. "I took advantage of a brief moment and tried to kick the gun out of the dealer's hand. Even then, he didn't let go of the gun, but I jumped on him right away. After that, it was just a brawl. These injuries are from that fight…"

"I tried to help too," said the stocky Kanioka, "but as you can see, I'm not exactly built for fighting. I rarely get into fights, so I was quickly overpowered and ended up with my face like this."

I see, so that explains Kanioka's impressive bruises.

"But during that scuffle, I managed to wrestle the gun away from him. I pointed the gun at him, trying to take control of the situation, but…"

At that point, the Diet member's son trailed off again.

"You need to explain everything in detail," Zenko said, irritated. "If I'm going to give you the appropriate legal advice, I need to know exactly what happened."

"Y-Yes. So, I somehow managed to point the gun at him, but the 'Dealer' must've thought I wouldn't actually shoot—he jumped at me without any hesitation. The 'Dealer' clearly seemed more experienced in fights, and he was bigger than me, so I… I had no choice but to pull the trigger. But since it was my first time ever firing a gun… the bullet went off in some random direction."

"I see. And then?"

"Then, the 'Dealer' knocked me down. After that, he got on top of me, and started beating me up."

I see. So that's how Akio Ebiyama got his facial injuries.

"However, I still had the gun in my hand at that point."

There was a brief pause.

"I see, so in the middle of that beating—" Zenko continued, picking up the thread of the story. "You ended up shooting him, is that correct?"

"…Yes. I was getting punched in the head over and over, and I was on the verge of passing out. Barely conscious, I aimed the gun at his face… After that, I don't really remember much. I think I heard the gun go off, but at the same time, I blacked out."

"I see. Mr. Kanioka… was it? You were watching the whole thing, weren't you? How did it look to you?"

"Y-yes. What Akio is saying is true. I wasn't entirely with it either, since I'd been punched in the face and was pretty dazed, so I don't remember everything clearly. But I did see the gun in Akio's hand flash, and at the same time, the 'Dealer' suddenly collapsed with a thud. After that, I

helped Akio up, but the 'Dealer' had been hit in the left side of his head, and blood was pouring out of him like someone had turned on a faucet. He was completely limp."

"I see. So, I understand the gist of what happened. And after that? Did you confirm that the 'Dealer' was dead?"

"No, well, my foolish son did something incredibly stupid after that—" It was Haruhiko Ebiyama, Akio's father, who answered Zenko's question. "Apparently, the two of them completely panicked after that, terrified the whole thing would become public, and they ended up throwing the 'Dealer' into the dam before fleeing the scene."

"…I see. Well, that was certainly a troublesome move."

Wow, they really messed up. They didn't have to go that far and finish him off.

"I suppose this happened because I've been too lenient with him," continued the father, clearly burdened by his misbehaving son. "As a Diet member, I've hardly had any time to spend with my children. About the only thing I could do was give them pocket money and make sure they lived a comfortable life. That kind of neglectful parenting must've led to this incident."

Yes, no doubt about it. Giving him nothing but pocket money and then going hands-off? This is exactly why politicians from the Liberal Economic Party are no good. How could you let your son embody all the worst parts of capitalism? I'd recommend switching to the Communist Party starting tomorrow.

"Given what's happened, I've resigned myself to the fact that my political career is over. I don't care about that. I just want to avoid my son becoming a murderer. Please, Mr. Yamashika, could we not rely on your wisdom?"

"Hmm, well, I generally don't take on cases where it's obvious that someone's been killed… But from the sound of things, there's a possibility it could be considered legitimate self-defense. I also don't like seeing promising young people saddled with excessive charges. I'd like to help as much as I can… However, with the end of the year coming up, I'm quite busy. And with such a complicated case, I'd have to turn down other work and focus exclusively on this. That would mean losing out on valuable income, especially during the expensive holiday season."

Haruhiko Ebiyama, clearly well-versed in life's finer details, quickly grasped what Zenko was hinting at.

"Money is no issue! I'm willing to pay whatever it takes for the sake of my son! You can use whatever methods you need!"

"You can leave it to me. I'm quite the expert when it comes to this."

…Oh boy.

"So, will you take on the case?"

"Yes, of course. Now, as for the retainer… would this amount be acceptable?"

There was a brief pause.

"Y-Yes, I anticipated something like this, so I brought extra cash. No need for a receipt. Please, take it."

"Ah, thank you very much. I appreciate this."

The tone of Zenko's voice at that moment was utterly delighted. He must have fleeced them pretty thoroughly.

"Very well. With this, I am now your official legal representative. I will do everything in my power to ensure that you don't have to deal with the police. In return, you are to hide nothing from me and follow my instructions to the letter. Is that clear?"

"Yes, we understand. Of course."

"However… this is shaping up to be quite a thorny case. From what I've heard, it does seem like legitimate self-defense. Anyone would feel their life was in danger with a gun pointed at them, and if someone accidentally kills in the middle of such a struggle, it's usually ruled as self-defense. In that case, the best outcome would be no charges at all, and at worst, your son might only get a suspended sentence."

"Hearing that from you, Mr. Yamashika, is very reassuring."

"The problem is that you threw the 'Dealer' into the dam. Now, there's the possibility that when your son fired the second shot, the 'Dealer' wasn't dead yet. But you two went and threw an unconscious 'Dealer' into the dam. If you do something like that, obviously the 'Dealer' will drown. Even a child could understand that. This creates room for the prosecution to argue that there was intent to kill."

"S-So, you're saying… this is a very dangerous situation?"

"Yes, well. However, since you haven't reported this to the police yet, and the scene of the crime is a deserted area near the dam, we might be able to turn this in our favor. I'll need to think this through carefully."

"I-I see."

At that moment, the phone began to ring again with a trill.

"Oh, looks like the doctor I called has arrived. Just in time, too. Let’s get your injuries treated first while I think things over."

Soon enough, I could hear someone entering the office.

Unable to resist, I cracked the door open slightly to peek inside. Fortunately, the people inside were too distracted by the new visitor to notice me.

As expected, the person who entered was a doctor named Ujigami Kudoku, someone Zenko knew. Well, technically, he was a coroner who specialized in autopsies, but still, a doctor.

As soon as Ujigami stepped into the office and looked at Zenko and the three clients, he immediately said something in a disappointed tone.

"What’s this, they’re still alive?"

"Is it a problem that they’re alive?!"

Even Zenko couldn’t help but retort.

"Don’t get so worked up, Yamashika. I wasn’t talking about you."

"Of course not! And what do you mean, is it a problem that the injured are still alive?!"

"Oh, sorry about that. You said it was some secret job for me, so I figured it would be something like helping you dismember a body or something like that."

"Who the hell would ask you to do that! What I need is for you to treat these guys' injuries!"

"Tch, what a pain. Well, whatever. I’ve got some disinfectant and a suture kit, so I can manage. But listen, Yamashika, I may have a medical license, but my specialty is corpses. The next time you need someone to treat living people, call a different doctor."

"...You really hate dealing with living people that much?"

"Yeah, I do. You know how it is—living people cry and scream over every little slip of the hand. And did you know? When you're cutting open a living person’s stomach, you actually have to use anesthesia each time? It’s such a hassle."

"..."

An uncomfortable silence filled the office. The two injured men's faces turned pale. Understandably so.

"...Fine, I get it, that was my bad. Just make sure they're patched up enough that they won't need to go to a hospital."

"Hmm..."

Ujigami looked over the two injured men.

"Eek."

A short cry escaped from Kanioka's mouth, who looked rather timid.

"Enough that they won't need to go to a hospital, huh? Well, in that case, I suppose the quickest way would be… to just stab them?"

"Wait, wait, wait! What are you planning to do with that scalpel?! Are you trying to kill them?!"

"Well, they wouldn't need to go to a hospital then, would they?"

"..."

"Tch, fine, I got it, it was a joke. Alright, you, come here. I'll treat you."

"Y-Yeah..."

Akio Ebiyama's face grew even paler, and it wasn't just because of the blood streaming from his head.

"Don't worry so much. Sure, my specialty is dead bodies, but there aren't many doctors out there who've handled as many human bodies as I have. Just think of it like you're on a big, safe ship."

Well, that's a bit of an odd reassurance.

I don't think I was the only one who thought that, but since I wasn't the one being treated, I decided to let it slide.

So, the so-called "expert" treatment began.

First, disinfecting the cuts. Using tweezers, Ujigami grabbed a cotton swab soaked in disinfectant and pressed it hard against the bleeding wound. Squish.

"AAAAHHH! It hurts! Could you be a little gentler…?!"

"Ah, quit whining. I don’t have a habit of being gentle with men."

"T-That’s insane! AAAAAHHHH!"

"Tch, this is why I hate treating living people. Look, look, pain is proof you’re alive. Just accept it and keep feeling the pain. Soon enough, it’ll turn into pleasure."

...He’s talking nonsense. I had a feeling, given that he’s Zenko’s acquaintance, but this guy is definitely an S.

"Hey, what’s this? You’ve got another wound here."

He spotted a small cut near the base of Ebiyama’s right thumb and pressed the cotton swab against it again.

"AAAAHHHH! You’re stabbing me! The tweezers are stabbing me!"

"Quit your whining. Relax, the tweezers are disinfected."

...Yeah, I don’t think that’s the issue here.

Finally, Ujigami began assessing the head wound, which was still bleeding.

"Hmm, this one’s pretty deep. Looks like I’ll need to put in two or three stitches."

"Huh?"

Ebiyama’s face stiffened.

Meanwhile, Ujigami, for some reason, looked delighted as he picked up a needle and thread.

"Don’t worry, I’m a doctor who’s sewn up countless injuries on corpses. I’ll get this done quickly."

"Wait! At least use some anesthesia, please!"

"What are you talking about? I brought tools for working on corpses, you think I brought anesthesia? Besides, using anesthesia for something as minor as this would just slow down the healing process. Come on, grit your teeth like a man."

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!"

Ebiyama’s screams echoed for a while, but Ujigami continued stitching him up with a rhythm as if he were humming a tune.

But then, something happened.

Snap

"Ah."

A strange sound, and suddenly Ujigami’s hands stopped.

A bit of blood spurted out, splashing onto the table.

We all went silent, staring at Ujigami, wondering what had just happened.

But Ujigami, completely unfazed by the awkward atmosphere, calmly said:

"Eh, it’s fine."

"No, no, no, no! What do you mean, ‘it’s fine’? What was that weird sound just now—"

"Don’t worry about it, it’s not a big deal. It’s not my body, after all."

"Of course I’m worried about it!"

"Shut up. Keep making a fuss, and there’ll be another snap."

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!"

...I made a vow in my heart.

Even if I ever got injured and wanted to save on medical costs, I would never let this doctor treat me.

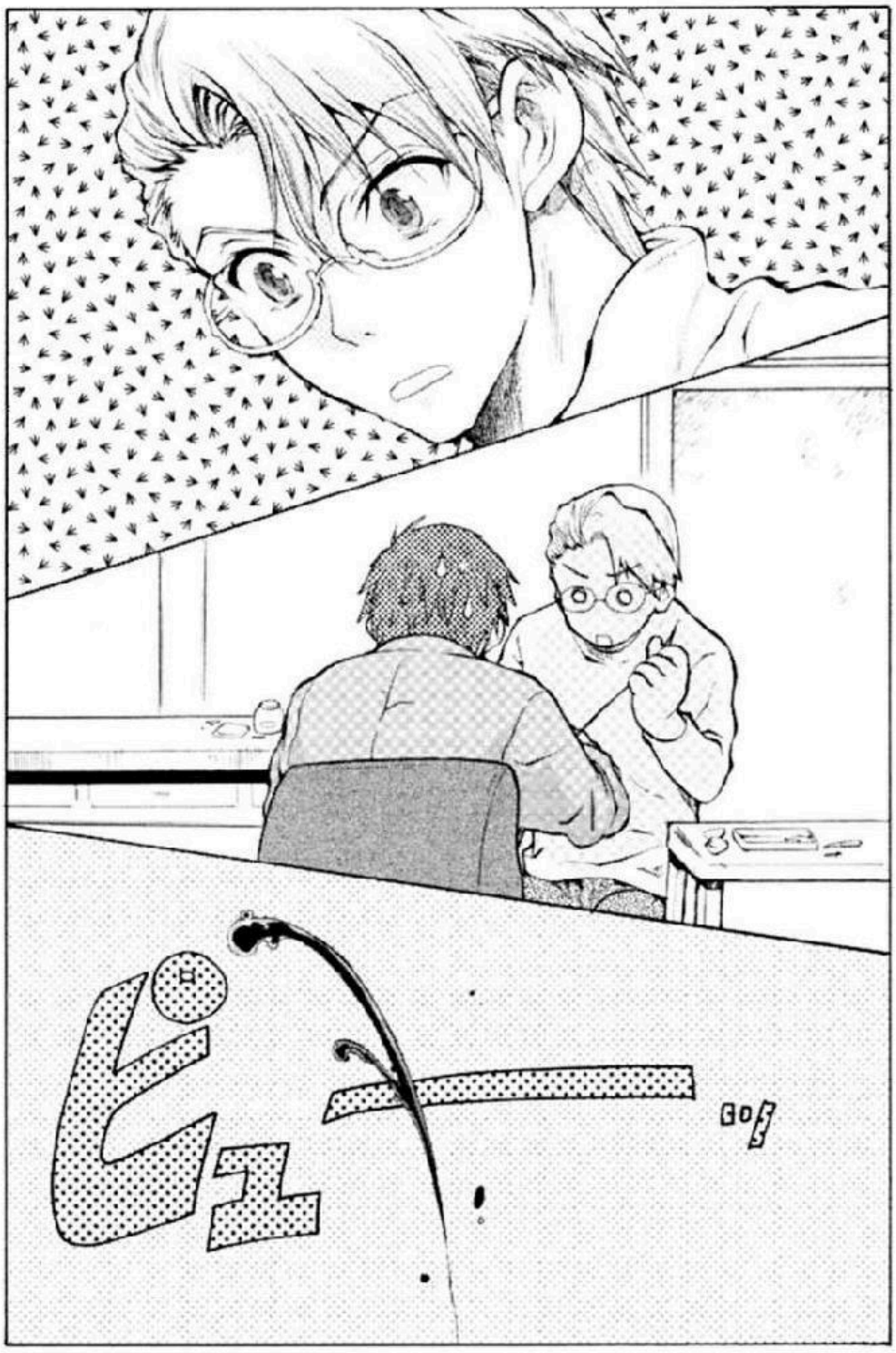
But seriously—what a group. A crooked lawyer, a lousy detective, and a quack doctor. The person who came up with the saying “birds of a feather flock together” was a genius.

After a few more minutes of screams echoing through the office—

"Alright, looks like we’re done. All finished."

"..."

Akio Ebiyama, completely drained, was panting heavily.


ピュー
BOF

"Hey, I just treated you—aren't you going to say thanks?"

"T-Thank you very much!"

He shouted, almost out of desperation.

"Doesn't sound very sincere, but whatever. Now, next up… is you."

"Eek!"

Like a frog frozen in front of a snake, Kanioka let out a squeal.

"N-No, no, no, I'm fine! It's just a little bruise on my face, that's all!"

"You sure? It doesn't look like much, but you never know."

"Yes! Yes! I'm fine! Thank you very much!"

"Alright, if that's what you want. Well then, I guess my job here is done."

The quack doctor turned to Haruhiko Ebiyama and said:

"So, let's settle the bill. Secret treatment, no insurance, and for this little patch-up, it'll be 300 dollars."

That's expensive!

...I wasn't the only one who thought that.

But the quack doctor wasn't about to let us off without justifying it.

"Oh, don't think it's too much, sir. Any kind of surgery without insurance will cost at least 60 dollars. And I can tell you've got some special circumstances if you can't go to a regular hospital. Plus, if I'm not mistaken, I recognize your face, sir. Aren't you a bit of a public figure?"

"..."

"But, don't worry. I'm known for my discretion. The more you pay me, the more I'll keep my mouth shut. You can trust me on that."

Hmm. Birds of a feather. If Zenko had said the exact same thing, it wouldn't have felt out of place at all.

"...Alright. I'll trust your word, then."

Maybe it was because he was used to this kind of thing, or maybe because he'd been through so many similar situations, Haruhiko Ebiyama didn't even blink as he pulled out a thick, black leather wallet. Casually grabbing a handful of bills, he handed them over to Ujigami.

"Well, well, much appreciated. You see, Christmas is just around the corner, and I'm planning to take my wife out for a little trip while we leave my daughter with her grandparents. I've got a lot of expenses coming up."

"I-I see. Well, give my regards to your wife."

...Being in this office really makes you realize how small and pathetic men can be.

"Alright then, I'll be taking my leave. I wouldn't want to stick around and overhear something that's bad for both of us."

"Wait, Ujigami."

As the quack doctor was about to leave, the crooked lawyer stopped him.

"Huh? What is it, Yamashika? My job's done, let me go. I'll miss dinner."

"If you're leaving, you'd better cough up the middleman's fee."

The corrupt lawyer extended his hand, demanding his cut.

"Tch, you sure don't miss a beat when it comes to things like this, you greedy lawyer."

Well, they're both the same in this case.

But then, unexpectedly, Zenko lowered his right hand.

"Oh, never mind. Ujigami, you can keep the intermediary fee. But, in return, I have one more question I'd like you to answer."

"Oh? What is it? If that's the case, I'll gladly answer whatever you've got."

"Alright, don't ask why I'm asking this, and don't get any strange ideas. What happens if you throw a freshly dead body into a lake? It won't float up right away, will it?"

"...What a morbid question, out of nowhere. Well, it depends on the situation. Whether a body floats or not comes down to whether it's heavier or lighter than water. You get that much, right?"

"Yeah."

"A human body's density is about the same as water. But there's a lot of individual differences, you know? People vary in things like body fat percentage, right? So, if water's density is around 1, then a human's density is roughly... what was it again? I think it's somewhere between 0.98 and 1.02. That means some people will float if you leave them be, but generally, unless the person's holding air in their lungs or moving their limbs to keep themselves afloat, they'll sink. You've heard on the news about how drowning victims are usually found underwater, haven't you?"

"I see, so basically, a body won't just float up right away?"

"Yeah, that's right. Although I've heard that around 20% of bodies do float, and if the person's carrying something heavy, like coins or a watch, it might change the situation. And in this season, after about ten days, gases from decomposition will build up in the body, making it float for sure."

"I see, that makes sense."

"Good. Well, now I'm really done here. Have a good Christmas, all of you."

With that, Ujigami whistled cheerfully as he left.

The three clients saw him off, half in a daze.

◆

"Alright, now that the treatment is done, let's get back to the matter at hand."

In the office, now restored to a calm atmosphere, Zenko brought the conversation back around.

"R-Right."

Haruhiko Ebiyama, the member of parliament, pulled himself together and got ready to listen.

"While we were waiting, I took some time to reconsider the situation from various angles. As I've said before, based on what you've told me, this case could indeed be considered self-defense. However, to be honest, it's hard to say whether that alone will be enough for an acquittal. You were threatened with a gun, so I can understand you had no choice, but there were two of you, and after the incident, you sank the body in a dam. The prosecution might not argue self-defense or even excessive self-defense—they might go straight for a murder charge."

"I see..."

"Also, there's another potential issue: violations of the firearms and swords control law. As you know, Japan has very strict regulations on the possession and use of firearms. In this case, you only used the gun in self-defense, so it might be possible to work around it, but if it comes out that you were messing around with the gun for fun and then got involved in this incident, it won't garner much sympathy. This could be a major obstacle to establishing a case for self-defense.

That being said, fortunately, your son is still a student. He can use the excuse of youthful recklessness, so there's no need to be overly pessimistic."

For Zenko, this was a rather vague explanation.

"I see, so what you're saying is that, as things stand, the situation is far from optimistic, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Mr. Yamashika, I fully understand that I'm asking a difficult favor. However, if things come to that, it would not only affect my political career but also my son's future. Is there no way to resolve this matter without it becoming public?"

Come on, old man.

If there were some easy solution to this, Japan would have turned into a crime-ridden country a long time ago. The world isn't that sweet, Mr. Parliamentarian.

...At least, that's what I was thinking.

But I'd completely forgotten something at that moment. The person handling this consultation was none other than Zenko Yamashika, the scam artist lawyer.

"Well, actually, I've been thinking about that very thing this whole time. You know, the day after tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I'd like to have this matter settled by then if possible. And to be honest, there's one way we could go about it."

...Seriously?

"W-What method is that? Could you please enlighten me?"

"Sure. Now, this method won't exonerate your son, per se. But it will make it impossible for the prosecution to pursue the case. That way, your son won't be arrested."

"T-That's wonderful. What exactly is this method...?"

"Hold on a moment. First, I need to confirm a few things. This method is not something I'd recommend lightly. I'd prefer not to use it unless absolutely necessary. But, as a lawyer, if it's to

protect the promising future of a young man who, driven by fear for his life, had no choice but to kill in self-defense, I have no choice but to do everything in my power. You understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, I understand completely."

"Alright, then first—" Zenko turned to the two injured men. "I need both of you to swear something. Swear that the story you just told me is the absolute truth, and that everything you did was in self-defense. If you can swear to that, I, too, will do everything in my power as a lawyer."

"Yes, of course we swear. Right, Hironobu?"

"Y-Yes, I swear too."

"Good. Now, one more thing I need to confirm with your son. Where's the gun you used as the murder weapon right now?"

"...I left it at the scene, so it should still be near the dam."

"So, it's still out there, and no one's found it yet. That's good. Now, the two of you will follow my instructions from here on out. Understood?"

"W-Well, sure, but…" Kanioka said nervously, "What exactly are we going to do?"

"Don't worry, it's nothing too difficult. First, we're going to head to Ryugu Dam, where the incident took place."

This is starting to smell fishy.

The scene of a murder that hasn't even been reported to the police yet. What exactly is this devil of a lawyer planning to do there? Whatever it is, it can't be anything legitimate.

And with that, Zenko abruptly stood up.

"Wait here for a moment. I need to prepare a few things."

Zenko walked towards me, so I quickly shut the door, grabbed a random book from my bag, and pretended to read.

Soon after, Zenko entered the room.

"Huh? What, are you done talking?"

"Cut the bad acting. You were eavesdropping, weren't you?"

I flinched.

"W-What are you talking about?"

I'm not good at hiding my feelings, unlike a certain lawyer, so I couldn't keep my composure.

"Whatever. I'm heading out for a bit. You should leave too—or at least keep quiet."

With that, Zenko opened a shelf in the corner of the room—he took out an old flashlight and, for some reason, a toolbox. From the toolbox, he pulled out a tool.

It was a file. A long, thin file, the kind we used in shop class. It was still in its packaging, unopened, brand new.

Then, he took out four pairs of rubber gloves used in the kitchen, four pairs of cheap slippers, and four towels.

This is bad. The fact that he's preparing gloves for everyone means he plans to hide fingerprints. The slippers must be for footprints. The towels, hair? I don't know what he's plotting, but it's definitely something bad.

I can't just let this slide. I absolutely have to follow them.

"So, you're heading out? I'll just step out for a bit too. There's a book I want to pick up."

"Oh, is that so? Well, do as you please."

Oh, I will do as I please.

I grabbed my bag, left the room, ignored the intense gazes of the three visitors, and quickly exited the office.

My destination was the parking lot in the basement of the building. Zenko's white sedan was parked there.

Anticipating something like this, I had paid 20 dollars to get a spare key made for the car. I used the key to open the trunk and, without hesitation, slipped inside. The trunk couldn't be opened from the inside, but if I removed the back seat, I could get into the car's interior, so I wasn't too worried. It was a bit unnerving in the pitch black, but when I thought of the hardships faced by revolutionaries like Che Guevara, this much was nothing.

Within five minutes, I sensed someone approaching. Needless to say, it was Zenko and the three clients.

Then, they got into the car and, without noticing I was in the trunk, started the engine and drove off.

◆

The car, with the five of us inside, drove in silence for about thirty minutes before finally stopping.

Ugh, my body hurts. After all, I was being jostled around in the trunk, without any cushioning, on a mountain road.

"We're near the campsite by the dam, so this must be the place, right?"

"Yeah, this is it."

Akio Ebiyama answered Zenko's question.

"Alright, before you get out of the car, put on these rubber gloves. Then, wrap these towels around your heads. It'll be a bit hard to walk, but change into these slippers. We're not leaving any traces of us being here."

Zenko's tone had suddenly reverted to giving orders. This is getting really shady.

"O-Okay," Akio stammered. "But you don't really need to worry too much about footprints. This area is pretty much covered in fallen leaves."

"That would be ideal, but we're doing this just in case."

Fully prepared, the four men got out of the car.

I waited until I was sure none of them were coming back, then popped out the back seat from inside the trunk.

I quietly opened the car door and stepped outside. The cold December mountain air immediately stung my soft skin. Ugh, it's freezing. While Zenko might be fine, I'd definitely catch a cold if I stayed here too long.

It seemed like we were in a parking lot near the campsite. Naturally, given the season, there wasn't anyone else around.

In the distance, I could see the beam of what seemed to be Zenko's flashlight. They were heading toward the dam. I cautiously followed the light.

The surroundings were pitch black, and the only thing I could rely on was the faint starlight. I had a penlight and a bugging device, both essentials for a lady like me, but neither would be much use in this situation. I had no choice but to rely on the faint starlight and my instincts as I followed the four men.

Eventually, I reached a spot where the lake—or rather, the dam—spread out to my right. The faint starlight flickered on the surface of the water. But in this complete darkness, the footing was treacherous. And with this cold, I didn't want to get too close.

On the left side, opposite the dam, there was a steep slope. No, it was more like a cliff. Large and small rocks jutted out, looking like they could tumble down at any moment. There was a thick netting covering the area to prevent rockfalls, but it wouldn't stop smaller rocks from rolling down. Well, with my good karma, I wasn't afraid of any falling rocks, but Zenko might be in trouble. He could die any second.

"This is the spot," Akio Ebiyama said.

Zenko and the others stopped and shone their flashlights on the ground at their feet.

"So, that means the body should be around here too."

Zenko pointed his flashlight at the dam.

However, either because the body was sunk deeper than expected, or because the water in the dam wasn't particularly clear, they couldn't see any sign of the corpse.

"Tch, I guess seeing the body is out of the question. Fine, first find the gun you left behind. Then, the shell casings too. You fired two shots, so there should be two casings somewhere around here."

At Zenko's instruction, the three men began searching like it was a treasure hunt.

It was the middle of the mountains in winter. Fallen leaves were scattered all around, and it was completely dark. Searching for shell casings in such conditions was taking quite a bit of time, but fortunately, the search area was limited. Before long, a pistol and two shell casings were gathered at Zenko's feet.

"Ah."

The moment I saw the gun, I let out a slight groan.

With my 20/20 vision, I could clearly see the grip of the gun—it was marked with a star.

A star, the symbol of hope for communists. That gun was definitely a Tokarev, an automatic pistol manufactured in communist countries.

...Not that that information is particularly helpful.

"So, what are we going to do with this?" asked Haruhiko Ebiyama.

"First, we're going to wipe off the fingerprints. That way, it'll erase any evidence that you were the one who used this gun."

"W-Wait a minute, Mr. Yamashika," Kanioka interrupted, sounding startled.

"Hm? What is it?"

"Uh, isn't this gun the murder weapon?"

"Of course it is. It's the gun that killed someone."

"Then... isn't it an important piece of evidence? Is it really okay to tamper with something like that?"

"Now, I have no idea what you're talking about. Listen, it's December. And in the cold, it's normal for anyone to be wearing gloves. In other words, as soon as the fingerprints are wiped off the gun, the police will assume the suspect was wearing gloves. In that case, no one's going to think it's strange that there aren't any fingerprints on the gun. Even if they do suspect something, it's impossible to prove that the prints were wiped off. Besides, lifting fingerprints from a gun is a tricky business. Unless the user was gripping the barrel or something, it's considered lucky if they can even get any prints at all. So, the police won't find it suspicious if there aren't any fingerprints on the gun."

Makes sense. As always, his underhanded cleverness is impressive.

"But—"

Zenko pointed his index finger.

"Akio Ebiyama, you're the one who's going to handle the gun. Just holding it is a violation of the law in itself. Even in a situation like this, as a lawyer, I can't break the law."

"I-I see. Understood."

Akio Ebiyama, apparently having come prepared, took the cloth Zenko handed him and carefully wiped down every part of the gun.

"How's... this?"

"Yeah, that'll do. Now, onto the real task. Use this."

What Zenko handed over—was a rod.

No, there's no way this devil would bring just a rod in a situation like this. It was a file.

"What do you want me to do with this?"

"Listen carefully, this is important. If a police investigation starts, the first thing they'll check is whether this gun, found at the scene, was actually used in the crime. You've heard of rifling marks, right? Inside the barrel of a gun, there are grooves that spin the bullet to increase its accuracy. It's called rifling or something like that."

"Oh, I've heard of that," Kanioka interrupted, "No two rifling marks are the same, just like fingerprints, so they use those characteristics to identify the gun used in the crime, or something like that…"

"Exactly. So in a case like this, the police will compare the rifling marks on the bullet extracted from the victim's body with the rifling marks on a test bullet fired from the gun. That's how they determine if the gun was actually used in the crime."

At this point, Zenko's face twisted into a grin, and he said something outrageous.

"Now then, what do you think would happen if those two sets of rifling marks didn't match?"

Wha—?

I had a really bad feeling. It seemed like he had just said something incredibly dangerous.

If the rifling marks on the bullet from the victim's body didn't match the rifling marks from the gun that was supposedly the murder weapon…?

That would mean the gun that was supposed to have been used in the crime wasn't the actual murder weapon. In other words, the bullet used in the crime would have come from a different gun than the one they have now—which doesn't even exist. But regardless, it would mean the bullet came from some imaginary gun.

If that happened, the prosecution wouldn't be able to build a case for this crime!

And now, in Zenko's hand, there was a metal file…

Everyone was holding their breath.

Zenko handed the file to the dumbfounded Akio Ebiyama.

"You understand what I'm saying, right? And how to use this?"

"Y-Yes."

Ebiyama, his hands trembling, took the metal file.

He then stuck the file into the barrel of the gun and began scraping it, *scree, scree*…

A thought crossed my mind.

Maybe I'm witnessing a serious crime in progress right now.

"Hey, stop. That's enough. You only need to scrape it a little to change the rifling marks. If you overdo it, the police will get suspicious, and that would defeat the purpose."

"Y-Yes, I understand."

"Good. Now, the next thing we need to deal with is the firing pin mark."

"The firing pin mark?" Akio Ebiyama echoed.

"Yeah, as the name suggests, it's the mark left by the firing pin when it strikes the back of the bullet. It's not on the bullet itself but on the shell casing. Like rifling marks, it's a clue the police use to identify the gun that was fired."

"I see," Haruhiko Ebiyama nodded. "So, if we file down the firing pin inside the gun, they won't be able to detect it?"

"No, there's no need to go through the trouble of messing with the firing pin. We've got the shell casings right here, so we'll just scrape those instead."

Makes sense. I remembered a previous case where Zenko had been cornered because of the firing pin marks. Looks like he learned from that experience. It just makes him even more dangerous, though.

"So, we're just going to scrape the bottom of the shell casings, right?"

“Yeah, of course, but don’t just scrape the bottom. You need to scrape the entire casing. With automatic pistols, the shell casings are ejected every time you fire a shot, right? The casings get unique scratches on them when they’re ejected. So, to keep it simple, just scrape the entire casing. But don’t overdo it. Even the tiniest scratch will make it impossible to identify.”

“I see, got it.”

Akio Ebiyama took the file and one of the casings. He pressed the corner of the file into the small indentation where the firing pin mark would be and twisted it around. Then he scraped the whole casing, *shsh, shsh*.

“How’s this?”

“Yeah, that’ll do. With this, the case is practically solved. Even if the police start investigating, they won’t be able to identify the murder weapon. Just toss the gun and the casings somewhere around here. If someone sees us, we’re screwed, so let’s get out of here.”

“Wait. Shouldn’t we take the gun with us? If there’s no trace of it being used, wouldn’t it be better to keep it?”

“You idiot. I’ve already told you, just carrying a gun is a crime. What if you get unlucky and a cop stops you for questioning while you have it? Carrying a gun around is just asking for trouble. Just toss it.”

“Okay.”

“But, Mr. Yamashika,” this time it was the father, Haruhiko, who spoke, “Wouldn’t it be better to at least throw it into the lake?”

“I thought about that too. But you’ve heard what happens with bodies in the water, right? After about ten days, gas builds up inside the body, and it floats to the surface. So in ten days, this crime will come to light, and the police will start investigating. Once they figure out the crime scene is the dam and that the victim was shot, they’ll thoroughly search the dam. If we just toss it, they’ll find the gun easily.

It’s a bit of a gamble, but if we leave the gun on land, the rifling marks won’t match, so the police will have no choice but to think someone left the gun here to confuse the investigation. But since there’s no gun in existence that matches the rifling marks, the investigation will hit a dead end.

On the other hand, if we throw the gun into the dam, it’ll rust after being in the water for days. In that case, even if we hadn’t scraped the rifling marks, the rust will make it impossible to identify them. But if the police find a rusted gun at the bottom of the dam, they’ll just say, ‘The rifling marks couldn’t be identified due to rust, but it’s clear the culprit threw the gun into the dam to delay the discovery of the crime.’ In other words, they’ll still have a way to build the case.

Either way, they won't suspect us, but there's no need to go out of our way to help the police. Right?"

"…I see. You're absolutely right."

Man, this guy is really clever when it comes to stuff like this…

◆

And so—

The four of them tossed the gun and shell casings on the ground and started heading back. I hurried to sneak back into the car's trunk.

Before long, the four of them got into the car, left Ryugu Dam, and returned to the Yamashika Law Office.

With this, the police had no chance of building a case, and the three clients thanked Yamashika and left the office.

It seemed like the case had been resolved—but.

Zenko kept glancing at the wad of cash he'd just received, grinning sleazily.

Watching him, I thought to myself.

Is this really okay?

I mean, if the case really ends without being built, it wouldn't be very exciting—no, I mean, Zenko's crimes would go unpunished. Saying it's to protect the client's rights is just a flimsy excuse. Tampering with evidence to that extent is way over the line—it's basically a crime in itself. This can't be allowed.

On top of that, Zenko actually managed to finish the job before Christmas and get paid. There's no telling what he might do to Yukina if this keeps up.

So, that means…

It's time for me, the embodiment of justice, to step up.

All evil must be punished. If I don't take matters into my own hands now, Zenko will just get more and more brazen. I can't let someone like him get away with this. If not me, then who? The Lone Ranger? Nah, that's too old.

Besides, this client is none other than a future enemy of mine, a Diet member from the Liberal Economic Party. If it had been someone from the Communist Party, I might've left it alone, but…

In any case, if I take Zenko down, I'll also take down Ebiyama, and Yukina will be saved. It's like killing three birds with one stone.

But how should I do it? Should I call the police? Tell them there was a murder near Ryugu Dam, and that a lawyer and the culprit tampered with the evidence?

But the reality is, if I—a second-year middle schooler who looks so pitifully innocent and pure—were to make such a dark and twisted report to the police, they'd never believe me. On top of that, if it ever got out that *I* was the one who reported it, who knows what kind of revenge that nasty, sly, and cowardly evil lawyer would take on me later.

I crossed my arms, spat on my fingers, and started thinking.

Pok pok pok, chiiin

I got it! …No, seriously.

I can't do something like secretly snitching to the police. So, the answer is obvious.

And so, I quietly began tailing one of the three men who had just left the office…

身から出た錆
第一章

Chapter 1: Reaping What You Sow

December 23rd, 2:15 PM, Yamashika Law Office

“Guhu… guhuhuhu.”

The wallet, stuffed full of bills. Every time I looked at it, I couldn’t help but suppress the laughter rising inside me.

Tomorrow is finally Christmas Eve. The day of my date with Yukina.

Everything is going perfectly.

I’ve already meticulously finished planning for tomorrow. The only concern I had was my wallet. After all, it’s the end of the year. With the office maintenance costs and all the other expenses piling up, it’s not like I had much extra to spare. And recently, most of my clients have been regular folks, so I couldn’t charge them outrageous fees.

But even that major concern was easily resolved by doing just one night of proper legal work.

The request that came in last night… Even now, thinking back on it, I managed to wrap it up quite smoothly.

After all, the body is at the bottom of the dam. Unless there’s some weirdo who decides to go scuba diving in the middle of winter, there’s no way it’ll be discovered anytime soon.

Sure, in about ten days, the body will start to bloat with decomposition gases and float up, but it’s such a remote place that no one’s likely to pass by. And even if by some chance the body is found, there’s not a single piece of evidence at the scene that could link that shellfish duo, Ebi & Kani, to the crime. On top of that, the gun used to kill the victim can never be found again—in fact, it no longer even exists in this world.

And there’s more. The guy who got killed was an arms dealer. There could be any number of rivals or disputes that led to his death. Even if the body of a black-market dealer surfaces, there’s no risk of suspicion falling on the shellfish duo.

So, the case that came in last night is now completely solved. I don’t care about past clients anymore. What I need to focus on now is confirming the plan for tomorrow in every detail to make sure nothing goes wrong.

For now, the plan is set. First, I’ll meet Yukina at the station at 3 PM. Then, we’ll go to a movie. Movies don’t really have anything to do with Christmas, and I feel like objecting to that, but considering Yukina’s tastes, it’s something I can’t skip.

By the time the movie ends, it'll be just about dinner time. Christmas Eve dinner has to be French cuisine. Don't ask me why. I can't exactly take her to an all-you-can-eat grilled meat place, can I? Of course, I don't know a thing about table manners, so I've already made reservations at a place that's a bit more casual where I won't have to worry about such things.

While we enjoy a Christmas-appropriate romantic dinner, I'll give her the Christmas present. I've already bought it—a classy silver bracelet.

Why a bracelet? There's a big reason for that. It's to make her take off the watch she's probably wearing.

Anyway, once dinner is over, the next stop is church. We'll go to see a mass.

A mass is, uh… you know, where they sing hymns or something? It's not like I've had some religious awakening, and I don't know a thing about religious ceremonies, but I heard from some married quack doctor that if you reserve a spot, you can soak up all the Christmas atmosphere you want without spending a dime. I'm a bit skeptical, but I'm using it as a reference. When we actually get there, I'll just have to be careful not to fall asleep.

Now then. After the mass, we'll take a short walk in the park. It's Christmas Eve, after all. The park will be teeming with couples. Walking there together will naturally make us feel like we're a couple too.

But walking in a park at night in December will quickly make us cold. That's when the real fun starts.

First, I'll say, "It's getting chilly, how about we grab a drink somewhere?" and then I'll take her to the lounge on the top floor of a luxury hotel. At that point, I'll conveniently forget that Yukina is still only nineteen.

A quiet lounge on Christmas Eve. The perfect mood, the perfect view. We'll clink our glasses, and once Yukina, who isn't used to alcohol, is tipsy enough, I'll deliver the finishing blow.

"Here's to your beautiful eyes."

That's it.

Perfect.

At that point, Yukina will be head over heels for me in every sense of the word! Gufahahaha!

…And just as I was meticulously simulating tomorrow's schedule, I heard the voices of two of the freeloaders at this office, that bumbling detective and the mischievous middle school brat.

"Hey, did Yamashika eat something weird? He's been acting strange for a while now."

"What are you talking about? You've known for ages that a few screws are loose in his head."

"Yeah, I know he's been crazy for a while, but I don't think he's ever suddenly started screaming like this."

"There's not much of a difference. It's what they call 'six of one, half a dozen of the other.' And you know what they say—the candle burns the brightest right before it goes out."

Hmph, say what you want.

What do those losers, who don't even have anyone to spend Christmas Eve with, know? Their words don't hurt me at all.

Now, let's leave those losers behind and get back to reviewing the plan.

A quiet lounge at night.

Yukina, completely smitten.

This is where the effect of giving her the bracelet and making her take off her watch will come into play. In other words, I'll make her miss the last train. When she realizes she missed the train and is in a bind, I'll say this:

"I actually booked us a room."

That's it. That's the line.

After all, Yukina was the one who suggested this Christmas Eve date, so it's safe to assume she's at least somewhat prepared for this.

And then, I'll pretend to support the drunken Yukina, and take her into a suite at a top-class hotel, and take her in… gufu.

"Gufahahahaha!"

"Hmm, yeah, this is getting pretty bad. Maybe we really should call an ambulance soon."

“What the hell are you talking about? Haven’t you heard the saying? There’s no cure for stupidity. If you’re going to call someone, it should be the police, not an ambulance.”

“You’re right. It would be better for society if we handed him over before he does something stupid.”

Heh, say whatever you want, you losers. Just for today, I’ll let you say whatever you please.

Alright, the plan is perfect. I’ve already booked the necessary romantic Christmas stay course. No issues with the budget either. Now all I have to do is wait for tomorrow.

And then—

“Good morning…”

Who else but Yukina walked in.

…Wait a minute. Something’s off.

Her voice lacked its usual energy, and she was looking down. What’s going on? Just yesterday, every time we met, she’d happily say, “I can’t wait for Christmas!”

Yukina walked into the office without even hanging up her coat and came straight over to me.

“Mr. Zenko, I’m so sorry… I heard from little Iyo. You’ve got work again, don’t you?”

“…Huh?”

“No, I understand. I really do. I know that you couldn’t possibly leave someone falsely accused of a crime to fend for themselves.”

“…What?”

“There’s always next year, and we’ll have another chance. I’ll be waiting.”

No, what are you talking about, Yukina? I don’t know what that brat told you, but that case has already been wrapped up. It’ll be a while before the crime is discovered, and there’s no way I’ll be busy on Christmas…

“Now, for the next piece of news.”

…Just as I was about to explain, it happened.

The TV that someone had left on. I had been mostly ignoring the content, but when I heard a familiar proper noun, I couldn't help but listen.

"A body has been discovered at Ryugu Dam—"

"…Huh?"

I reflexively turned toward the TV.

That's strange. What did they just say? Ryugu Dam… if I remember correctly, that's the dam I went to yesterday. But something's off—why would a body be found there? Sure, there's a body down there, but wasn't it supposed to be at least ten days before it would be discovered?

Could it be there was really someone with such a bizarre hobby as scuba diving in a dam in the middle of winter? No, no way. That kind of eccentricity only happens in novels.

"The body was discovered by the caretaker of Ryugu Dam, who happened upon it during a routine inspection. The body had gunshot wounds, and the police have launched a murder investigation while working to identify the victim."

"W-What the hell——!?"

Are you kidding me!? The dam's caretaker!? You've gotta be joking, why the hell are you so diligent at your job!? Don't be so serious that you find a body at the bottom of the dam!

Okay, wait. Calm down. Just because the body's been found doesn't mean anything's going to happen. In the end, they won't even be able to identify a suspect—it'll just turn into a cold case. There's no need to panic. Forget about this case and get back to enjoying Christmas Eve and my morning coffee at dawn.

…Perhaps it was that kind of complacency that was the problem.

When the phone suddenly started ringing, I flinched instinctively.

It was just a phone—but I couldn't think of it that way. I had a bad feeling.

And somehow, I knew that feeling wasn't wrong. Now that I think about it, every time I had a golden opportunity to get closer to Yukina, something always interfered. It happened so often that I'd come to call it the "curse of interference." Sure, as a lawyer who's been through countless cases, it's only natural that I've made some enemies, and it wouldn't be surprising if someone had placed a curse or two on me…

And tomorrow is Christmas Eve, with my date. As much as I don't want to think about it, if the curse were to strike again, now would be the time.

So, what will happen if I pick up this ringing phone? It feels like something irreversible will occur.

What if I don't pick it up? Honestly, though, I doubt that not answering the phone would be enough to avoid the "curse of interference." In fact, if I don't pick it up, I have a vivid image of my lawyer's license sprouting wings and flying away.

No. Calm down. You carve out your own destiny. There's no way not answering the phone would result in my lawyer's license being revoked. I should just ignore this call—at least, that's what I started to think, but…

"Hello, Yamashika Law Office."

Yukina picked up the phone without hesitation.

"Yes, understood. Please hold for a moment."

She then handed the receiver to me.

"…Who is it?"

"A Mr. Haruhiko Ebiyama."

…It felt like my bad premonition was kicking off a year-end mega sale.

Haruhiko… that's the father of that useless son, the politician. With some trepidation, I took the receiver.

"This is Yamashika speaking."

"Ah, Mr. Yamashika! It's me, Ebiyama. Something terrible has happened."

"What happened? What's going on?"

"Well… the police just came by and…"

Every instinct I had was screaming at me to end the call right now.

But in the brief moment of hesitation, the next words came out.

"Akio has been arrested. On suspicion of murder."

"..."

So, is fate something that's already determined?

I came up with a hypothesis. Let's say I immediately cut ties with Ebiyama and prioritize my Christmas Eve date with Yukina.

What would Ebiyama do then? Naturally, he'd have no choice but to hire another lawyer.

And then what? The new lawyer would start asking Ebiyama about the details of the case. Since it's necessary for the trial, Ebiyama would naturally answer. He would reveal how, under the direction of a certain lawyer, the evidence—such as the gun and the bullets—had been tampered with.

Now, here's another interesting element.

As a righteous lawyer, I've made countless enemies over the years. And those enemies include the Bar Association, the police, and the prosecutor's office. Everyone knows this. Any lawyer would.

If I were to withdraw from this case, what would the new lawyer do?

It's obvious. They would approach the prosecutor and say: "Although this case was merely an act of self-defense, the previous lawyer complicated the situation and put the defendant in an unfavorable position. Therefore, the one who should be punished is not my client, but the previous lawyer. If the prosecution is willing to recognize it as self-defense and reduce my client's sentence, I'll ensure that Ebiyama testifies about the misconduct of the previous lawyer."

As I've said before, I'm not on good terms with any legal organization. If things go that way, the Bar Association and the prosecutor's office will join forces to come after me. My lawyer's license will be revoked for sure. On top of that, the prosecutors will charge me with treason, and I'll be paraded through the streets before being executed on the gallows.

…Well, let's set aside that overly grim imagination for now.

More importantly, even if I were to abandon my troubled client and prioritize the date, would Yukina really be happy about that? Knowing Yukina's personality and circumstances, probably not. Yes, that's right. I don't care if my lawyer's license gets revoked or if I'm charged with treason. I absolutely cannot betray Yukina's expectations. Who cares about a lawyer's license? Seriously. I mean it. Totally.

What should I do now? In the end, there was only one conclusion. The moment the phone started ringing, everything was already decided.

I must accept my fate.

But I still don't get it. The sneaky work I did last night should have been flawless. There shouldn't be any evidence left that could prove the crime. So how the hell did they manage to arrest him?

But the reality is, Akio Ebiyama has been arrested. This makes me regret my actions last night. As long as that remains, I'll have to continue my surveillance—er, I mean, my legal defense of Ebiyama to keep him quiet. If only I could just embark on a journey like that hobbit and toss that gun and those bullets into Mount Fuji's crater.

Anyway, I've now figured out what I need to do. I spoke into the receiver.

"Your son's in the detention center, right? I'll head over there immediately. Whatever you do, don't answer the police's questions."

"I-I understand."

I hung up the phone.

…Now. Before I head to the detention center, there's something I must do.

I nervously turned to Yukina.

"S-Sorry, Yukina. It looks like tomorrow is… well, it's not going to work out."

"It's okay. If it's work, there's nothing we can do."

Yukina smiled gently as she spoke.

…Why does she look a little scary right now?

"I-I promise I'll make it up to you! Oh, right, Christmas might be out, but how about we go somewhere around New Year's?"

But Yukina's response was curt.

"Sorry, my dad's coming home on the 29th, so I'll be staying at home for New Year's."

"O-Oh, I see. Then, how about the 28th? The trial should be done in about three days, so I'll be free by then."

For some reason, Yukina sighed with a deep "Haah."

"Well, if it's that day… But really, you don't have to push yourself. You'll be busy again toward the year's end, won't you? They call it the 'rush of December' for a reason."

“N-No, it’s nothing like that! I’d clear my schedule any day for you, Yukina!”

“Wha…?”

That line might have come off as a bit cheesy, even to me. But it seemed to have had its intended effect, as Yukina’s cheeks flushed slightly, almost reflexively.

I thought I might have a chance—until…

“But in the end, you’ll still prioritize work, won’t you~?”

That damn brat just had to chime in with that comment.

Yukina’s tone immediately dropped, and with a voice brimming with a sense of duty, she said,

“…Alright. The 28th, then. I’ll be waiting. Oh, and Mr. Zenko, actually, the university said they need some extra hands. I’d like to help them out for about three days. Can I leave the office for a bit? Since tomorrow’s no longer happening, anyway.”

I could only hope it was my imagination that made her last sentence sound unusually sharp.

Was she basically saying she didn’t want to see me for a while? Well, I guess I had it coming. Cancelling a Christmas Eve date we had planned for so long… I should be grateful she wasn’t outright furious.

In any case, I was clearly in the wrong, and I had no right to refuse her request.

“Y-Yeah, sure. Don’t worry about the office. Just prioritize the university.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it. Well then, I’ve got some errands to run at the university today, so I’ll be heading back now. See you later.”

“Ah… O-Okay, see you on the 28th.”

Before I could even stop her, Yukina briskly left the office.

And left in the room were me, standing there stunned with my hand still raised from seeing her off, and two good-for-nothings who clearly seemed to be holding back laughter.

…Someone, please tell me.

What happened to my Christmas? My elegant dinner? The romantic “Here’s to your beautiful eyes”? Where did my dawn coffee with Yukina go?

ぎゅー…
Uuuu..

God… Did I do something wrong? No, I didn't. All I did was offer my client the best possible service. So why is this happening to me? This treatment is too cruel. I even had a reservation for the midnight mass because I believed in You!

Or maybe, have I earned the Buddha's wrath for playing favorites with God? Or could it be that I'm being punished because my intentions for attending mass were impure?

Yes, they were impure! So what if they were!? That's the kind of creature men are at their core, you damn beast!

Huff… Huff…

And there's one more thing. Something that's been bothering me for a while now.

Why has the brat Satsuki been grinning non-stop? As if she knew this would happen…

No, there's no way a kid like that could concoct a scheme to trap me. It has to be just my paranoid delusions—yeah, that's got to be it.

December 23rd, 3 PM, Detention Center

When I arrived at the visiting room, separated by a transparent wall, I saw Akio Ebiyama, looking utterly dejected.

But as soon as I sat down in front of him, Ebiyama flared up like a shrimp, suddenly full of anger.

"Mr. Yamashika! What the hell is going on? Why the hell did I get arrested!? Didn't you say yesterday that I wouldn't be arrested anymore?!"

"Calm down. Don't shout unnecessary stuff. You never know who's listening."

"Ugh…"

Grudgingly, Ebiyama clammed up.

"Have you cooled off a bit? Alright, let's talk. I'll admit, your arrest was unexpected for me too. But there's no point in dwelling on what's already happened. Right?"

"…Yeah, I guess."

"Good. Now that things have come to this, the only thing we can do is assess the situation and come up with a plan, step by step. First, tell me—how did the police take you in?"

“How, you say…? About two hours ago, the police showed up and said they wanted to ask me some questions about the body found at Ryugu Dam, so they asked me to come to the station.”

“And then? Did you go to the police station?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Damn it, why did you just go along with them? They didn’t even have a warrant. You could’ve refused, or at least consulted me first.”

“Well… you were so confident yesterday saying I wouldn’t be arrested. So I thought, if I’m not going to get arrested, I might as well go along and see what they want, maybe even brag about it later…”

Dammit. This is why clueless idiots are so annoying. Why didn’t he even consider why he might suddenly be a suspect?

“Alright, fine. So what happened after that?”

“Well… suddenly, once I got into the interrogation room at the station, the detectives’ attitude changed. They started glaring at me like gangsters and said I was suspected of murder. Then they told me if I had something to say, I’d better speak up now.”

“And then?”

“Well, I got a little scared and said, ‘I’ll remain silent. Let me call my lawyer, Mr. Yamashika.’ Then, all of a sudden, they seemed to lose interest, and they told me to wait a while, that I could phone you. But after about thirty minutes of waiting, they suddenly slapped me with an arrest warrant.”

What the hell? That’s so random. If they were going to arrest him, they could’ve at least given me something more substantial to work with! Detective Inaba, could you at least try to scare him a bit with some evidence first? Or did they realize, after Ebiyama mentioned my name, that they wouldn’t get anything out of him?

Well, never mind that. There is, however, one thing that stands out from his story.

For some reason, the police no longer need Ebiyama’s testimony. They’ve already gathered enough evidence to prove the crime.

But it doesn’t make sense. That shouldn’t be possible. That’s why I went out to that freezing dam in the middle of the night last night—to take care of everything.

Could it be that, without realizing it, Ebiyama left some trace at the scene, whether it was blood or hair, and the police found it? If so, that could prove that Ebiyama was at the crime scene. And from there, they would have enough to suspect him, wondering why he was even there in the first place.

But in order to do that, they would first need to have a sample of Ebiyama's DNA to compare with any hair or blood they might have found at the scene. Just finding hair at the scene wouldn't be enough by itself; they would first need to have Ebiyama on their radar as a suspect. But how could they have known about him in such a secluded, deserted place?

And yet, the police managed it. But how? And besides, it's not that easy to find blood or hair outdoors, where the wind blows everything away. The place was covered with fallen leaves, after all. If they did find blood, it would only be from the "Dealer."

More importantly, there's one other thing. Even if, by some means, they were able to link Ebiyama to this crime, what about the murder weapon? There's no way the gun, which we had meticulously tampered with, could be identified as the murder weapon. Without the murder weapon being identified, it's hard to believe they could easily issue an arrest warrant. And yet, Ebiyama has indeed been arrested. Was the tampering on the gun incomplete?

Or maybe, was there someone who witnessed Ebiyama and Kanioka committing the crime, and that person reported it to the police? If that's the case, it would explain why Ebiyama was arrested even though there should be no evidence.

But hold on. This happened at a dam in the middle of the mountains. Even if someone witnessed Ebiyama and Kanioka committing the crime, for that witness to lead to an arrest, they would have to know Ebiyama and Kanioka by sight. Could such a coincidence really happen? Or did they remember the license plate of the car that Ebiyama and Kanioka drove away in?

As I thought this through, something occurred to me, and I asked Ebiyama again,

"By the way, were you the only one arrested? What about Kanioka?"

"Beats me. I haven't heard anything about him being arrested."

Hmm… That's strange. If the police had arrested Kanioka as well, they would definitely have mentioned it. And during the interrogation, they would have threatened him like this:

'Kanioka's already confessed. Now that he's confessed, staying silent won't do you any good. If you come clean now, your sentence might be lighter.'

That's the usual tactic when there are accomplices.

The fact that they didn't use this classic line means that Kanioka hasn't been arrested yet. Strange. If there was a witness, both of them should have been arrested. What's going on?

Well, technically speaking, Kanioka didn't actually fire the gun. He just went along to the scene and got smacked around a bit. Still, he helped hide the body in the dam without reporting the crime, so it wouldn't be surprising if he were treated as an accomplice.

"And, Mr. Yamashika, what's going to happen to me now?"

Ebiyama asked, sounding anxious.

—I've got a good idea. Later, I'll sneak in a long towel for you. You can wrap it around your neck and hang yourself from something high. That way, everything will be resolved without any loose ends.

I held back from saying that.

If Ebiyama were to kill himself now, all the shady—no, I mean, the legal defense work I've done would stay under wraps, and I'd finally be free for Christmas Eve—

…No, of course I'm not thinking that. Not at all.

"Well, what's done is done. Now that you've been arrested, we'll just have to wait for the pretrial hearing, which will likely start the day after tomorrow, and see how the other side plays this. Don't worry too much. The prosecution probably doesn't have much solid evidence, so there's a good chance we can get the case dismissed for lack of evidence. And if that doesn't work, we can always argue self-defense. You'll probably be stuck in the holding cell for a while, but there's no need to be too pessimistic."

"W-Wait a minute! I have to spend some time in this pigsty!? You've gotta be kidding me! I have a date tomorrow! What are you gonna do about that?!"

"Oh? That's quite the coincidence. So do I."

"…H-Huh!?"

I didn't glare at him or threaten him or anything, yet for some reason, when our eyes met, Ebiyama let out a small scream.

"That's right. I've been spending the last few days, sacrificing sleep, planning out the perfect date course for tomorrow, booking a hotel, working my tail off to save up money, and even getting a gift ready. All of that, ruined, thanks to your trial. Now, don't get me wrong—I'm not blaming you. I get it, you're young, and it's only natural that you'd want to fire a gun. And thanks to that, all my date plans went up in smoke. But again, don't get me wrong, I'm not holding a

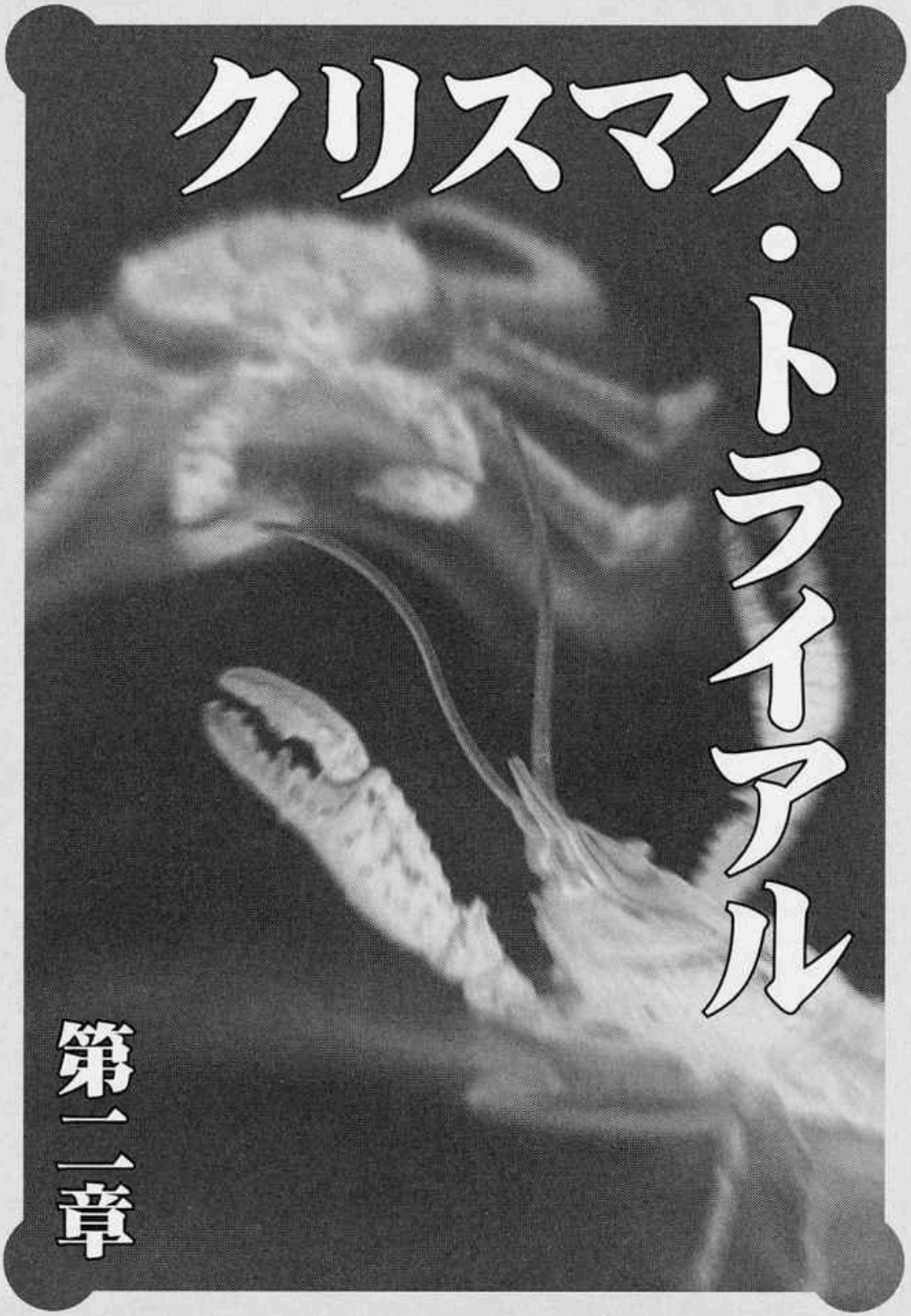
grudge against you or anything. I'm a lawyer. Cleaning up after people like you, who make these stupid mistakes, is my job. So even though the date I worked so hard on, including the non-refundable deposits, has all gone down the drain, well, nothing you can do about it. But don't get me wrong, I'm not saying it's your fault. This is my job, after all. So that's how it is. I'll suck it up, and you'll suck it up. Fair enough, right?"

"Y-Yes…"

It seems my sincere persuasion worked, as Ebiyama quietly nodded.

Given the circumstances of this case, there's a good chance he could be granted bail as early as tomorrow, especially if we can make a case for self-defense, but I'm not going to tell him that. It'd ruin the fun.

And so, this case smoothly transitioned past Christmas Eve and moved forward to the courtroom stage.


クリスマス・トライアル
第二章

Chapter 2: Christmas Trial

December 25th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom 3

"The Honorable Judge Shudo is entering the courtroom. All rise!"

The loud voice of the bailiff echoed throughout the courtroom.

The spectators and participants all rose together, waiting for the judge—who could be called the overseer—to take his seat.

At the defense table were myself and the defendant, Akio Ebiyama. On the prosecution's side were Prosecutor Horiuchi and an assistant whose name I didn't know. And presiding over the court was Judge Shudo.

I always wonder why the lineup remains the same every time. Well, it makes sense that the defense table remains the same, but why doesn't the prosecution send someone other than that shorty prosecutor who's been losing to me repeatedly? Are they trying to avoid producing more defeated prosecutors? Hmm, that's possible. No doubt about it.

It makes sense for the prosecution, but why is the judge always the same too? Could it be that Judge Shudo is monopolizing my trials because they're too entertaining? That would seem to be the case.

"Now, I'd like to begin the preliminary hearing regarding the murder charge against the defendant, Akio Ebiyama."

And so, once again, the curtain opened on today's trial.

"Prosecutor Horiuchi, are you ready?"

"Of course, Your Honor!"

The unusually shorty prosecutor answered enthusiastically.

"Defense counsel, are you ready?"

"Yeah, more or less."

Unlike the overzealous defeated prosecutor, I responded casually.

My lack of motivation wasn't without reason. Today was the 25th, Christmas Day. It's the day Santa brings presents to good children. And despite the fact that I, a good child who has

devoted everything to saving the poor souls falsely accused of crimes, was here—Santa, that bastard, didn't bring me a single thing I'd be happy about.

Yes, my Christmas had come and gone without excitement. If my plans had gone smoothly, I should still be at the hotel, getting ready for the morning round of fun. Instead, here I am, in this cold courtroom, waiting to see what the shorty prosecutor has in store. Damn it.

As for yesterday's Christmas Eve, I don't want to talk about it. Not one bit.

"Alright, Prosecutor Horiuchi, you may begin."

"Understood. The prosecution would like to call its first witness, Mr. Kishiya Mokuge."

The witness who took the stand appeared to be in his thirties, of average build and height, without any distinguishing features. Let's just think of him as "Supporting Character A." Even as he swore to tell the truth, his face remained half-tense, looking exactly like a background character.

"The first question," began Prosecutor Horiuchi. "You work at Ryugu Dam, correct?"

"Yes. I am employed in the operation and management of the dam."

"Could you please explain in order the events of the 23rd of this month?"

"Yes, well, it was around nine in the morning. I received an anonymous phone call at the management office where I was stationed. The caller claimed to have seen someone submerged in the northern part of the dam. Of course, I was suspicious at first and thought it might be a prank. But as someone responsible for managing the dam, I couldn't just ignore it—"

"Hold on," interrupted the shorty prosecutor. "There's no need for you to share what you thought. Please just tell us what you saw."

"I see, understood." Supporting Character A nodded in reluctant agreement.

"And then, you went to inspect the dam?"

"Yes, I did."

"And did you find anything?"

"Yes. I was walking carefully around the bottom of the dam, and when I reached the northern area, I saw that there was indeed a body submerged at the bottom."

"I see. And you immediately reported it to the police?"

"Yes. I returned to the office and called the emergency number right away."

So it was him! He was the one who reported it! Not just Supporting Character A, but the key witness! Damn it, if this guy hadn't let that weird phone call get to him and gone to check the dam, I'd be…!

Ugh, there's no point in dwelling on the past. I need to focus on the trial right now.

"Alright. Lastly, could you specifically tell us where you found the body?"

"Understood. As I've mentioned earlier, it was in the northern part of Ryugu Dam. To be exact, it was slightly to the north-northeast. There's a campsite on the northern side of the dam, and it was a little ways off from there, right by the shore of the dam's lake. The opposite side of the dam is a steep cliff, and at this time of year, there's hardly anyone around."

"No further questions."

Hmm… There are a few things that bother me.

First and foremost, what's with the anonymous phone call? Of course, I'm curious about who the caller was, but if someone found a body, why not just report it directly to the police? Why go out of their way to inform the dam manager? Could it be that the caller couldn't report it to the police directly?

And how did they even find the body submerged in the dam? It seems like it was possible to spot the body by looking into the lake during the day, but in this freezing weather, who would be peering into the surface of the dam as a hobby?

Wait a minute—an unsettlingly plausible theory just crossed my mind.

Could it be that on the night of the incident, one of the associates of the murdered "Dealer" was near the dam, and they witnessed the crime committed by that crustacean duo? That's how they knew about the body. But if the witness was connected to the "Dealer", they probably had a reason to avoid the police and chose to report it anonymously to the dam manager instead.

It's a plausible story. And thinking along those lines, I can see why the prosecution is pressing forward with this case, despite the lack of solid physical evidence.

But still, if someone witnessed the crustacean duo's crime, why hasn't Kanioka been charged as a co-defendant?

"Defense counsel, would you like to cross-examine the witness?"

"Yes, I would."

I stood up quietly.

No point in overthinking it. Let's start by pressing him about that anonymous phone call.

"Let me ask you a few questions. Mr. Mokuge, I'd like to clarify some things. First, regarding the anonymous phone call you received at your workplace, what kind of voice did the caller have?"

"Well, I couldn't tell their gender or age. It sounded like they were using a voice changer, or something like that. It sounded mechanical."

Ugh, a cliché move. But an effective one.

"Now, the phone number for the dam's management office—would that be publicly available information?"

"No, I don't think it's widely known. But if someone checked the phone book, I believe the number is listed there. We do occasionally get calls from people asking about the water release schedule."

Ack, that's a dead end.

"One last question. You said you found the body submerged in the dam. How deep was the water at that time?"

"Let me see. Well, it's a dam, so the water is quite deep overall, but the edges aren't as deep. I'd say it was about three or four meters deep."

"That's still pretty deep. As I recall, Ryugu Dam isn't known for having particularly clear water, is it?"

"Yes, that's correct. The water is quite murky."

"And yet, despite that, you were able to spot a body submerged at the bottom?"

"You're absolutely right. But, you know, when black human hair is swirling around like a ball of seaweed at a depth of about three meters, it's actually quite noticeable."

That's an image I'd rather not imagine.

"...No further questions."

I ended the cross-examination matter-of-factly. This guy is just another witness. I doubt I'd get anything out of him by continuing the questioning. I have to admit, I didn't gain much from this, but maybe things will pick up from here.

"Prosecutor Horiuchi, who is your next witness?"

"Yes. The next witness is Detective Inaba, who was in charge of investigating the case."

The man who took the witness stand was a detective with a face like a Buddha—though he had a bit of a yakuza vibe.

Like Prosecutor Horiuchi, this poor detective had been adding to his record of defeats every time he faced me. Still, excluding his yakuza-like appearance, he seemed to be fairly competent, and I'd heard good things about him, like how he'd pulled off a big arrest during a robbery. I guess it was just bad luck that he had to face me.

"Detective Inaba, you were in charge of investigating this case, correct?"

"Yes."

"Could you please testify about the general course of the investigation?"

"Yes. We began the actual investigation around 11 AM on the 23rd. First, we secured the crime scene, then retrieved the body submerged in the dam, and sent it for forensic autopsy."

"Alright. Could you testify about what you found during the initial stage of the investigation?"

"Understood. First, the crime scene was covered in fallen leaves and grass, so we couldn't find any footprints. However, there was a considerable amount of blood on the ground, and it looked like the area had been quite trampled. Also, we found a handgun and two used shell casings in the grass at the crime scene."

"You have that handgun and those two shell casings with you now?"

"Yes."

Detective Inaba produced a handgun and two shell casings in plastic bags, three items in total.

"Your Honor, the prosecution would like to submit this handgun as Exhibit A, and the two shell casings as Exhibits B and C, respectively."

"Defense counsel, do you have any objections?"

In response to the judge’s inquiry, I stood up and answered.

"As long as the condition is that the handgun and shell casings will be immediately removed from the record if it’s proven they have no relation to this case, I have no objections."

"Of course, we’ll soon prove their connection to the case," said Prosecutor Horiuchi confidently, and the handgun and shell casings were admitted into evidence.

Hmm. I doubt they’ll be able to prove a connection to the case, given how much we filed down that gun. The prosecution should already know by now that comparing the rifling marks is impossible. And yet, they’re coming on this strong… Do they have some kind of trick up their sleeve?

"Now then, Detective Inaba, could you explain what kind of handgun Exhibit A is?"

"That is commonly referred to as a Tokarev. It’s an automatic pistol that fires 7.62mm bullets. There was a time when Japan saw a lot of crimes involving handguns, and the Tokarev was frequently used in those incidents. It’s primarily produced in countries like Russia and China, and it’s said that a large number were smuggled into Japan, mostly from China. The one used in this case appears to be of Russian origin."

"How many bullets can a Tokarev hold?"

"Right. It can hold seven highly penetrative bullets in the magazine."

"Were there any bullets left in the handgun when you found it at the crime scene?"

"Yes. There were four bullets in the magazine and one in the chamber, making a total of five."

"Thank you. Lastly, Detective Inaba, you obviously also investigated the victim, correct?"

"Of course."

"Could you tell us what you found?"

"Yes. First, we identified the victim, which was actually quite easy. The victim had a criminal record. So, by simply taking fingerprints and matching them, we quickly identified the victim as a man named Shin Kaishiba."

"You mentioned the victim had a criminal record. What kind of record was it?"

"Illegal possession of firearms and narcotics trafficking."

"I see. Did you find anything else?"

"Yes. When we examined the victim's belongings, we found about ninety-two rounds of Tokarev ammunition."

Ninety-two rounds? That's a rather awkward number. Well, anything over fifty rounds wouldn't be unusual, though.

"No further questions. Defense counsel, your cross-examination?"

Prosecutor Horiuchi's tone was challenging.

"No, I have no questions at this time."

It was somewhat unsatisfying, but that was the only answer I could give.

"Alright, Prosecutor Horiuchi, your next witness."

"Yes. Next, we would like to call Dr. Eboshi, the forensic pathologist who performed the autopsy on the victim."

A pale, beer-bellied old man took the witness stand. His nickname was "White Pig."

"You performed the autopsy on Shin Kaishiba, the victim in this case, correct?"

"Yeh, I did."

"First, could you tell us the condition of the victim?"

"Yeh. The victim was found at the bottom of the dam, but there was no sign of drowning. However, there were several external injuries. First, there was a bullet wound in the back, then a laceration on the left temple, and a bruise on the head, as if it had been struck by something. Additionally, there were several bruises on his face and upper body, presumably from being beaten."

…Wait a minute. What did he just say? A bullet wound in the back? Hold on, wasn't the victim supposed to have been shot in the head?

"Could you clarify the cause of death?"

"Right, in short, it was a gunshot wound. As I mentioned earlier, the victim was shot in the back. Right… here, here."

Dr. Eboshi tried to reach around and point to his own back, but his somewhat obese body prevented him from doing so effectively. In the end, a young assistant prosecutor stood next to him, following the indication of Prosecutor Horiuchi.

Dr. Eboshi pointed to the right side of the assistant prosecutor's back.

"Right here. This is where the bullet entered—the entry wound, as we call it in our field—and this was the fatal wound. Now, as for the details of the cause of death… If you touch your own chest area, you'll notice it's surrounded by ribs, which form a protective cage."

Dr. Eboshi's hand brushed over the assistant prosecutor's back. A short yelp escaped the assistant's lips, and his face noticeably paled.

"The bullet that struck the victim shattered one of the ribs in the back, penetrated the chest cavity, and wreaked havoc inside. It finally stopped when it struck the sternum at the front of the chest. The bullet used in this case had a steel core, meaning it didn't break apart when it hit something hard and had enough energy to easily penetrate the human body. It would've been better if it had gone straight through, but instead, all the energy was released inside the body. On top of that, the human chest contains vital organs like the heart, lungs, and blood vessels that connect them, which is why we have such strong protection like the pectoral muscles and ribs. But since the bullet tore through that area, the victim likely died instantly."

"So, in summary, the victim was shot in the back by a bullet and died instantly?"

"That's correct."

Something's off. Really off. The defendant, Ebiyama, shot the victim in the left side of the head, right? The fatal wound in the back shouldn't have anything to do with this.

But then Dr. Eboshi continued.

"However, there is one more important fact I'd like to add regarding the victim's wound."

"What is it? Please testify."

"Yeh. The wound on the victim's back—the entry wound—had a significant peculiarity. Imagine this for a moment: a bullet is round, so when it enters the body, it naturally creates a round entry wound. However, the entry wound on the victim's back wasn't round; it was more like a vertical tear, as if it had been pierced with a knife."

"What does that imply?"

"Yeh, it means that the bullet didn't hit the victim straight on, but at an angle, or possibly even sideways. That's why the entry wound wasn't round, but vertically torn."

"Why would something like that happen? As a forensic expert, could you provide the most reasonable explanation for this?"

"Yeh. The first thing that comes to mind is a ricochet. For example, when a bullet hits something hard, like a rock, it can deflect and fly off at an angle."

"So, if a deflected bullet hit a person, the wound would look like the vertically torn wound we see here?"

"Exactly."

"Do you have any evidence to support that explanation?"

"Right, of course. It's the bullet we extracted from the victim's body. There are marks on the bullet that suggest it hit something hard."

Hmmmmm.

So, they're trying to argue that the bullet fired by the defendant ricocheted off something and then hit the victim in the back? Now that I think about it, the crime scene was right next to a slope littered with large rocks. Sure, it's possible a stray shot could have ricocheted off something...

But this is getting strange. I thought the victim had died from a gunshot to the head, but it seems the prosecution has a different interpretation. Well, either way, it looks like the defendant will still be charged with murder. Nonetheless, I have to admit, both the prosecution and Dr. Eboshi are being thorough in their examination of the body. Just like always.

"Dr. Eboshi, I believe you've brought the bullet extracted from the victim's body with you today?"

"Yeh, I've brought it with me."

He handed a bullet in a plastic bag to Prosecutor Horiuchi.

"Your Honor, I would like to submit this bullet as Prosecution Exhibit D. Additionally, I would like to pass this bullet to the jurors, so they can confirm for themselves the marks described in the testimony."

"Defense counsel, do you have any objections?"

"...Could you show me the bullet first?"

My request was accepted, and the bullet was passed to me.

It was a small bullet. Well, that's what you'd expect from a 7.62mm round. Still, it's unsettling to think that a single bullet like this can take a life.

As Dr. Eboshi testified, the bullet indeed had a dent, as if it had struck something hard. In the end, all I could do was silently hand the bullet back to the bailiff, and the bullet was admitted into evidence.

Prosecutor Horiuchi continued his questioning.

"Now, Dr. Eboshi, regarding the victim's fatal wound, did you discover anything else?"

"Right, there's one more thing.

When a gun is fired, unburnt gunpowder, carbon monoxide, and other hot gases are expelled from the muzzle along with the bullet. This means that if a person is shot from a very close range—specifically within a few dozen centimeters—burn marks and soot will be left around the entry wound. However, there were no such marks around the entry wound in this case."

"In other words, the victim was shot from a certain distance?"

"Indeed, that's correct for the fatal wound. However, as I mentioned earlier, the victim also had a laceration on the left temple. It seems likely that this laceration was caused by a gunshot fired at close range."

"So, the bullet fired at close range grazed the victim's temple, causing the laceration?"

"Indeed, that's correct. A pistol bullet travels at over 320 meters per second, and in the case of a Tokarev, it's over 400 meters per second, which is faster than the speed of sound. The bullet was so close to the victim's skull that it scraped the bone. If the bullet had been just five millimeters off, this wound might have been the fatal one instead."

"So, there were soot marks on the temple wound, indicating it was fired at close range?"

"That's right. There's no doubt that the shot was fired from very close range."

I see. This lines up with Ebiyama's testimony that the shot was fired during a scuffle.

So that's it. The victim was killed by a ricocheting bullet, after all?

The Tokarev can hold seven bullets. There were five bullets left in the Tokarev found at the scene, and two used shell casings were recovered. Ebiyama also testified that he only fired two shots at the scene. The numbers match up.

The first bullet missed everyone and flew off in some random direction. The second bullet grazed the victim's temple, hit a rock, ricocheted, and struck the victim in the back. The evidence seems to support that.

If that's the case… what terrible luck. Kaishiba ended up dead just because a bullet happened to ricochet, and now Ebiyama is being charged with murder.

"I see. Thank you. Now, you mentioned that besides the wounds to the temple and back, the victim had other external injuries as well. Could you testify about those?"

"Yeh, of course. The victim had several bruises on his face and body. They were concentrated on places like the cheek and abdomen—places that are often hit in a fight—so I believe the victim was involved in some kind of physical altercation. There was also another injury on the victim's head, as if he had been struck by something."

"Where on the head? Please testify precisely."

"Right about here."

Dr. Eboshi pointed to his own head, a spot slightly toward the back of the crown, closer to the rear of the head.

"Could you describe the nature of the injury in more detail?"

"Certainly. For example, if someone falls and hits their head on a flat surface like a floor or a wall, it would leave a bruise similar to this one."

"Was this injury inflicted before or after the victim's death?"

"It occurred while the victim was still alive. There was some bleeding in the affected area, and it was slightly swollen and red. This indicates the heart was still pumping blood at the time."

"So, if someone were to hit their head on the ground during a struggle, would it leave an injury like this?"

I slammed my fist on the desk.

"Objection! Leading the witness!"

"Sustained."

But Horiuchi, that smug bastard, didn't lose his composure.

"Very well, I'll withdraw the question. Dr. Eboshi, for my last question, could you testify about what you've determined regarding the time of the victim's death?"

"Yeh, however, this is something we don't have a clear answer for. When determining the time of death, we usually rely on factors like how quickly the body temperature drops, the degree of rigor mortis, and the presence of livor mortis, which are the marks that form when blood settles in the body post-mortem.

However, the victim was found submerged in water. In water, body heat is lost more quickly than in air, and we don't know how much time passed after the victim died before the body was thrown into the water. Because of this, it's difficult to accurately measure the rate at which the body cooled.

The degree of rigor mortis is also affected by the temperature of the surroundings, and livor mortis can only be used as a reference if the body remained in a stable position. In water, the body position tends to shift, so the livor mortis is not reliable either.

However, judging by the wrinkling of the victim's skin, I believe the body was in the water for at least twelve hours."

"What time did you perform the autopsy, Dr. Eboshi?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention that. I believe it was around noon on the 23rd."

"So, the victim was killed on December 22nd, correct?"

"Right, there's no doubt about that."

"That concludes my questions."

"Defense counsel, cross-examination?"

"Understood."

Finally, the moment had come. I stood up with a slight grin on my face.

The handgun had been submitted as evidence in this murder case. The bullet had been submitted as well. In that case, there's already a certain testimony that should have been given. Yet, Prosecutor Horiuchi didn't ask about it. If the prosecution won't bring it up, then it's my duty to do so.

"Dr. Eboshi, I'd like to ask you first about rifling marks. You're familiar with these, correct?"

"Correct, I am."

"Could you explain what rifling marks are?"

"...Sure."

With a tone that made it clear he found the question tedious, Dr. Eboshi explained that rifling marks are essentially like the fingerprints of a gun.

"Thank you, Doctor. Now, based on that explanation, I have a question. You extracted a bullet from the victim's body, didn't you?"

"As I testified earlier, indeed. Is there something else?"

"Detective Inaba also testified that a handgun was found at the crime scene. This gun was submitted as Prosecution Exhibit A. Naturally, you would have performed a comparison of the rifling marks to determine if the bullet extracted from the victim was fired from that handgun, correct?"

"Ugh."

Dr. Eboshi let out a small groan and glanced at the shorty prosecutor to read his expression. But the shorty prosecutor, as if to say this was no big deal, remained calm and composed. Seeing this, Dr. Eboshi reluctantly nodded.

"Right, we did conduct a comparison."

I smirked, curling the corner of my lips.

"Is that so? I was quite puzzled that this wasn't mentioned during the prosecution's direct examination. Could you tell us the result of that comparison?"

"The rifling marks did not match."

Dr. Eboshi answered surprisingly bluntly.

A murmur spread through the courtroom.

"Next question: there's something else called a firing pin mark, right?"

"...Right, there is."

"Could you explain what a firing pin mark is?"

"...Alright, fine."

With a tone of resignation, Dr. Eboshi explained that firing pin marks are like the fingerprints left on the casing by the gun, though they're not as accurate as rifling marks.

"Thank you, Doctor. Now, based on that explanation, I have another question. Did you compare the firing pin marks on the handgun submitted as Prosecution Exhibit A and the casings submitted as Exhibits B and C?"

"...Certainly, we did."

"And did the firing pin marks match?"

With a tone bordering on exasperation, Dr. Eboshi replied,

"No, they did not."

"Thank you. So, to summarize, the handgun found at the crime scene, the casings, and the bullet extracted from the victim's body have no connection whatsoever, correct?"

"W-Well, I wouldn't say there's absolutely no connection. The bullet recovered from the victim's body is the same type that could be fired from a Tokarev."

"But the rifling marks didn't match, did they?"

"Well, no."

"So, there's no evidence that the bullet found in the victim's body, Prosecution Exhibit D, was fired from the handgun submitted as Exhibit A. In that case, wouldn't it be fair to say that this handgun has no connection to the incident?"

"W-Well, since the rifling marks didn't match, you could interpret it that way."

"Is there any other possible interpretation?"

As usual, I pressed my point relentlessly. But this time, that approach backfired a little.

"W-Well, for instance, if someone had tampered with the barrel of the gun, like by filing it down, the rifling marks wouldn't match anymore."

...For once, I had to put some effort into keeping my face composed.

When someone hits on a truth that sharp, it’s hard not to let your reaction show.

"I-I see. Dr. Eboshi, can you prove that someone tampered with the barrel of the handgun submitted as Exhibit A?"

"No, I cannot."

Phew, that’s good enough.

I smiled, then turned to the judge for the finishing blow.

"Your Honor, I would like to assert my rights as defense counsel once again. As we’ve just heard, the handgun submitted as Prosecution Exhibit A has been proven to have no connection to this case. Therefore, I believe it is only appropriate to have this item removed from the list of evidence."

The courtroom quickly filled with murmurs.

Anyone could see that my argument was reasonable. True, the handgun had been found at the crime scene. But there was no evidence that it had actually been used. Removing it from the evidence was only natural.

"Objection!"

The sound of someone slamming their fist on the desk echoed.

Of course, it wasn’t me. It was Horiuchi. Probably not used to such theatrics, his face twisted in pain from the impact.

"Your Honor, we in the prosecution are prepared to present evidence that Prosecution Exhibit A is extremely relevant to this case. Therefore, we request permission to summon the next witness."

"Hmm. I see no reason to deny that request. Defense, do you have any objections?"

"No, go right ahead."

I responded confidently.

That shorty prosecutor just couldn’t give up. I didn’t know what kind of witness they’d bring, but there was no way they could link that modified handgun to this case.

"Very well. Defense, do you have any further questions for this witness?"

"No, nothing further."

"Very well. Prosecutor Horiuchi, if you have no further direct examination, please summon your next witness."

"Understood."

Prosecutor Horiuchi stood up and shot me a particularly nasty look.

Based on past experiences, that usually meant the next witness would be someone very damaging to my case. My back stiffened a little, but this time I wasn't afraid of who they'd bring. It would be pointless.

"Next, we would like to call the defendant's friend, Hironobu Kanioka, to the stand."

W-What did you sayyyy!?

Soon, the person standing at the witness stand was none other than that timid young man, Hironobu Kanioka, who had visited my office three nights ago.

...I see. Now I finally understood why this case, with its lack of physical evidence and no confession from Ebiyama, had still resulted in such a quick arrest and indictment. This bastard Kanioka had betrayed us and spilled everything. Indeed, there couldn't be a more fitting witness to establish Ebiyama's guilt.

But this was bad. Really bad. How much had Kanioka told them? Had he mentioned the instructions I gave him that night? If so, I was in trouble. Things that should never be revealed could come to light.

And I wasn't the only one shaken. The defendant, Ebiyama, was also staring at his former friend on the witness stand in disbelief. The only ones who didn't seem to grasp the gravity of the situation were the spectators and the five jurors.

In that slightly tense atmosphere, Horiuchi puffed out his chest and began his questioning.

"First, please tell the court about your relationship with the defendant, Mr. Ebiyama."

"Yes. I was in the same university club as him."

"So, you were quite close to the defendant, correct?"

"Yes."

The fact that Horiuchi was phrasing it in the past tense had a subtle sting to it.

"Now, let's talk about the afternoon of December 22nd. Where were you and what were you doing around 5 PM that day?"

"Yes. I was with Mr. Ebiyama, the defendant in this trial, near Ryugu Dam."

There was a brief stir in the gallery.

Damn that Kanioka, he must've struck some kind of deal with the prosecution. It seems he's genuinely planning to betray us without mercy. I thought he and Ebiyama were comrades, like the same kind of crustaceans, but maybe it's exactly because they're the same type that they didn't get along.

"Around 5 PM these days, it's already pitch-dark, so why did the two of you go to a place like Ryugu Dam at that time?"

"I just went along with Mr. Ebiyama because he invited me, saying 'Something interesting is going to happen.' So, I didn't know what the purpose was. But on the way there, I got him to tell me that we were going to borrow a gun from someone he met online and shoot it."

"I see. So, you headed toward the campsite north of Ryugu Dam, where there are no people around?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"You arrived at the location around 5 PM, right?"

"Yes. To be precise, it was about ten minutes before 5."

"And what happened after you arrived?"

"Yes. When we got to the meeting place, there was already a man waiting for us."

"The man in question is the victim of this case, Mr. Kaishiba, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. But at the time, he didn't tell us his name. He just said to call him 'Dealer.'"

"Alright. What happened next?"

"Yes. Initially, the plan was that Mr. Ebiyama would pay 300 dollars and be allowed to shoot fifty rounds. But when we got there, the Dealer changed his mind and said we'd have to pay another 300 dollars."

"I see. And how did the defendant react? Did he pay the 600 dollars?"

"No. To be honest, Mr. Ebiyama has a short temper when things don't go his way. So, he got angry and flat-out refused to pay 600 dollars, insisting on being allowed to shoot for the agreed-upon 300. That's when—suddenly, the Dealer pointed the gun at us."

"So, you were threatened, being told to pay the 600 dollars?"

"Yes."

"And then, what happened?"

"Seizing an opportunity, Mr. Ebiyama lunged at the dealer, and they started grappling. As I mentioned before, Mr. Ebiyama can't stand being threatened or anything like that."

"Please continue. What happened after that?"

"Yes. The two of them started grappling, and things got violent. I tried to help Mr. Ebiyama, but I got punched in the face and was quickly knocked back. But somehow, Mr. Ebiyama managed to snatch the gun away from the dealer. Then, in the heat of the moment, there was a loud bang, and a shot was fired."

"What happened with that first shot? Did it hit anyone?"

"No, it didn't hit anyone. I don't know where it went."

"Alright. What happened next?"

"After the shot was fired, both of them hesitated for a moment, but the fight didn't stop—in fact, it got even more intense. Eventually, Mr. Ebiyama was pinned down, and the Dealer took the mount position. Mr. Ebiyama was getting punched in the face repeatedly and was on the verge of losing consciousness. But at that moment, he still had the gun in his hand. He quickly pointed the gun at the Dealer's face and fired again."

"What happened to the Dealer?"

"He collapsed sideways, falling onto his right side."

As usual, Prosecutor Horiuchi allowed a moment of silence here, trying to give the testimony some impact.

"And then what did you do?"

"Yes. First, I helped Mr. Ebiyama, who was barely conscious, to his feet. Then I checked on the Dealer. Blood was streaming down from around his left temple, and he wasn't moving at all. Seeing all that blood, we panicked. We thought we'd shot and killed him."

"At that time, did you see the Dealer's back?"

He was referring to the fatal wound on the back.

"No, I didn't. It was already pitch-dark, and we were convinced we had killed him by shooting him in the head."

"So, what did you do after that?"

"We… well… we were terrified. I mean, we couldn't help it. We got threatened with a gun, ended up in a fight, and then in the heat of the moment, we shot someone and killed them."

"Mr. Kanioka, I can understand what you're trying to say, but I'm not asking about how you felt at that moment. I'm asking what you did—your specific actions."

Kanioka looked sullen for a moment, but realizing it wouldn't help him to argue, he answered obediently.

"We were afraid of the consequences of the crime. So, the two of us grabbed the dealer by his arms and legs and threw him into the dam."

The courtroom fell into silence.

With this, the defendant's guilt in the murder was practically certain. Everyone must have thought so.

But honestly, this wasn't that big of a deal to me. After all, in the worst-case scenario, Ebiyama would be convicted, but it wouldn't lead to my law license being revoked.

The problem is what comes next. I've got a bad feeling about this. Kanioka betrayed us and testified in detail about the incident without hesitation. I find it hard to believe that his testimony will end here. As for what else Kanioka might know—well, I really hope it's not what I think it is...

"So, you shot the Dealer and threw him into the lake. What did you do after that?"

"Yes. We thought that if we just stayed quiet, we wouldn't get caught by the police. But on the off chance something went wrong, we couldn't feel at ease. So Mr. Ebiyama suggested that we go and consult his father."

"By his father, you mean Mr. Haruhiko Ebiyama, the member of the House of Representatives, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Why did you decide to meet him?"

"Objection!" A sudden bang. "The prosecutor is asking for the witness's opinion, not facts!"

"Let me rephrase the question. Did you think that as a member of parliament, he could help cover up the incident?"

"Objection!" Another bang. "Leading the witness! I request that this be stricken from the record!"

"Objection sustained. Jurors, you are to disregard Prosecutor Horiuchi's last statement."

Ugh, that just hurt the defendant's image by about thirty percent.

"Let me rephrase the question. Mr. Kanioka, you and the defendant went to meet with Mr. Haruhiko Ebiyama and explained the situation to him, correct?"

"Yes."

"And what did you decide to do after that?"

"It was decided that we needed to consult a lawyer. So, Mr. Haruhiko Ebiyama took us to the best lawyer he knew."

"And what was the name of that lawyer?"

"Attorney Zenko Yamashika."

...Even though I'd been expecting it, hearing my own name come up in this situation still made my heart race.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the spectators didn't seem particularly surprised at this point. And why would they be? After all, I'm currently serving as Ebiyama's defense attorney, so the fact that they came to see me isn't anything shocking.

But the problem is the next part of the testimony that the shorty prosecutor is about to extract.

"The attorney in question, Zenko Yamashika, is the same Mr. Yamashika sitting right there, correct?"

"Yes. That’s him, Attorney Yamashika."

How satisfying it would be to walk over and punch that shorty prosecutor right now.

"So, you actually met with Attorney Yamashika, didn’t you?"

"Yes."

"What time was that?"

"It was about an hour after the incident at the dam, so around 6 PM."

"And you explained the situation to him?"

"Yes."

"And did Attorney Yamashika offer you any advice?"

"Yes."

"What kind of advice did he give you?"

"Objection!"

I couldn’t let this testimony happen. I slammed my fist on the desk, cutting off the statement.

"Any conversation between myself and my client is protected by attorney-client privilege, and any attempt to probe into that should be dismissed!"

"Your Honor, that’s not the case," Horiuchi objected as well. "This witness was the one who approached Attorney Yamashika for consultation. If I were trying to extract the conversation from Attorney Yamashika himself, that would be a different matter, but the person who sought the consultation should be free to testify of their own will."

"Hmm."

It now became a legal issue.

The judge pondered for about five seconds before saying,

"Prosecutor Horiuchi, I still believe that the conversation between a lawyer and their client should be protected by attorney-client privilege. It is not desirable for the content of that consultation to be brought up here. However, I also understand the points the prosecution has raised. So, what should we do?"

Hmm, the reaction wasn’t as favorable as I’d hoped. Looks like I need to press further...

Then, it hit me. There’s a simpler argument I could make.

I stood up again and faced the judge.

"Your Honor, let me rephrase. I would like to renew my objection, as the prosecutor’s question is asking for hearsay."

"Ah, in that case, your objection is sustained. Prosecutor Horiuchi, please change your question."

"Ugh..."

Serves you right, you short little prosecutor.

...Or so I’d like to say, but unfortunately, I hadn’t completely dodged the bullet yet.

Horiuchi quickly regained his composure and continued questioning.

"Mr. Kanioka, in any case, you received some advice from Attorney Yamashika regarding this incident, didn’t you?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"And what did you do after receiving that advice?"

"Yes. Following Attorney Yamashika's instructions, we returned to Ryugu Dam."

The murmuring in the courtroom grew louder.

"Why did you return to the scene?"

"Objection!"

"I’ll rephrase. Please, tell us in detail what you did at the scene."

I braced my facial muscles to maintain a neutral expression.

There was no avoiding it now. The worst-case scenario I had feared was about to unfold right here. If I so much as flinched or let my face twitch, it would be interpreted as a sign of nervousness. If that happened, it would be over. All I could do was endure and hold out. The chance for rebuttal would come soon enough.

And finally, the testimony came from Kanioka’s mouth.

"We went back to the murder scene at Ryugu Dam, and under Attorney Yamashika’s instructions, we wiped the fingerprints off the gun we had left there, then used a file to scrape the inside of the barrel so that no rifling marks could be detected. After that, we filed down the two shell casings that had fallen at the scene, so that the firing pin impressions couldn’t be identified."

The murmuring in the courtroom grew louder and louder.

'Murmuring, murmuring—oh, for crying out loud, shut up! What’s wrong with a lawyer doing everything they can to protect their client?! This is a right guaranteed by law, you ignorant fools!'

...I screamed inside my head, while outwardly maintaining a calm and composed demeanor. You couldn’t survive as a lawyer if you couldn’t at least pull off this level of performance.

"So, in other words, you tampered with the gun so that it couldn’t be linked to the crime?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Just to confirm, all of this was done on Attorney Yamashika’s instructions, correct?"

"That’s right. Mr. Ebiyama did everything under Attorney Yamashika’s direction."

"Good. What happened after that?"

"That’s all. After that, we went back to Attorney Yamashika’s office, then returned home."

"Did Attorney Yamashika tell you that you no longer had anything to worry about?"

"Objection!"

"No further questions."

The shorty prosecutor wrapped it up with a smug grin.

Damn it! Raising objections in a loud voice is supposed to be his job, not mine!

"Now then—"

At this point, Horiuchi turned back to the judge, looking absolutely delighted.

"Your Honor, as you’ve heard, Attorney Yamashika instructed and carried out actions that fall under Article 104 of the Penal Code: 'A person who alters evidence related to a criminal case

shall be punished with imprisonment for not more than two years or a fine of not more than 1200 dollars'—this is the crime of evidence tampering. Of course, we plan to indict Attorney Yamashika and bring the hammer of justice down on him after this trial concludes. However, for now, we strongly request that Attorney Yamashika be charged with contempt of court for tampering with evidence and significantly obstructing the proceedings of this trial."

Gaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Somebody, bring me Exhibit A and a bullet! I'll shove it right into that short guy's thick skull!

...But now's not the time to fly into a rage.

Damn you, Horiuchi, spouting whatever you like! I mean, sure, it's not like his claims are baseless—in fact, he's pretty much right—but no, no! I haven't done anything wrong! I've just taken the best course of action as a lawyer!

"Hmm... It does indeed seem difficult to immediately dismiss Prosecutor Horiuchi's demands as unreasonable. Defense counsel, if you have anything to say, I'm willing to hear it."

Even the judge was siding with him.

This is bad. Setting aside the crime of evidence tampering for now, contempt of court could be applied at the judge's discretion at any moment. I do not want to be a lawyer with a criminal record. I had to fight back at all costs.

I desperately tried to maintain my composure. My cheeks were starting to tense up from having been in defense mode for so long. Damn it, hold on, face!

This is the moment when losing your temper or showing fear would be fatal.

You have to smile.

I exaggeratedly shrugged my shoulders and let out a casual "hmph," then began my rebuttal in a calm, detached manner.

"Your Honor, there is no need to entertain Prosecutor Horiuchi's baseless accusations. He's simply trying to drag me down with unfounded claims. After all, this is the same Prosecutor Horiuchi who has lost to me in court countless times, and his grudge against me is—oops."

I deliberately covered my mouth.

"Apologies, I spoke out of turn, even though it's the truth. I won't drag this out. As is my right as defense counsel, I would like to conduct a cross-examination of this witness. That will clear my name of these false charges."

I smoothly strung together the appropriate words.

"Indeed, it does seem that you should be given the opportunity to explain yourself," the judge nodded. "Very well, we will proceed with the trial. If it is later confirmed that the defense counsel tampered with evidence as Prosecutor Horiuchi claims, we will revisit the matter of contempt of court. Defense counsel, you may proceed with your cross-examination."

Great, now I couldn't back down either.

There was nothing left to do but go for it. I had to tear Kanioka apart, humiliate him, and discredit him so thoroughly that his testimony would become worthless. That was my only way out now. Even if Kanioka's testimony was the absolute truth!

But there was one thing that still bothered me.

Why did Kanioka betray us?

Without his testimony, there wouldn't have been enough physical evidence in this case to even arrest, let alone indict, Akio Ebiyama. In fact, without Kanioka, the police wouldn't have had any reason to suspect Ebiyama at all. So, it couldn't have been that the police approached Kanioka and offered him a deal, like, "Turn in Ebiyama and we'll let you go." No, Kanioka must have decided on his own to sell out Ebiyama to the police.

But why would he do something like that? On the night of the incident three days ago, Kanioka didn't seem to harbor any hostility toward Ebiyama. More than that, Kanioka had surely left that night feeling reassured.

So why the sudden change of heart, selling Ebiyama out to the police?

...No way.

I can't be sure, but—could it have something to do with that delinquent middle schooler sitting in the gallery, sticking her tongue out at me?

Come to think of it, after we returned from the dam to the office and saw off the three visitors that night, that little punk left the office alone. She came back shortly after, just in time for dinner with Yukina.

I can't help but wonder—did Satsuki follow Kanioka at that time, telling him that if he sold out Ebiyama to the police, he could save himself...?

Ha, ha ha ha, no way. There's no way that middle schooler could come up with such a crazy idea. Besides, what motive would she have—no, wait, if it's that punk, it wouldn't be surprising if she did something that reckless out of spite.

Ugh, thinking about this isn't going to get me anywhere.

One thing is clear. If Kanioka's testimony is allowed to stand, some vice president of the bar association is definitely going to show up, gleefully snatching away my attorney's license. And naturally, Ebiyama would be found guilty. I'd lose both the title of "undefeated" and "lawyer" in one fell swoop.

It's a life-or-death situation.

I have to twist, deceive, and manipulate until Kanioka's testimony is dismissed as nothing more than nonsense. When I'm cornered, I tend to show what I'm really capable of. Probably.

I stood up slowly, exuding an air of confidence, and strolled over to the witness stand with a calm, deliberate gait. I approached Kanioka from the side, not from the front. This angle was better for intimidation.

"Now then, let me ask you, Mr. Kanioka—"

"Y-Yes?"

He must have already felt guilty about standing on the witness stand, and now his voice was betraying his nervousness.

"First, I'd like to ask about what happened when the victim and the defendant struggled. It's true that the defendant was threatened with a gun by the victim, and that's when the struggle began, correct?"

"Yes."

"And what were you doing at that time?"

"I already told you. I tried to help Mr. Ebiyama, but I got punched in the face."

"I understand that. But you didn't pass out from that, did you? You've testified in detail about what happened after that."

"W-Well, yes."

"So, after getting punched, you just stood there watching the two of them struggle, right?"

"W-Well, I suppose."

"Hold on a second. You were close to the defendant, weren't you? And your close friend, the defendant, was struggling with a man holding a gun. A single mistake could've cost him his life. And yet, you just stood there watching?"

"N-No, it's just that, well, you see, I was punched really hard in the face. I was pretty dazed. There's no way I could've stepped in to help."

"No, that's not believable." I firmly declared. "You've testified in such detail about the course of events. If you were truly dazed, you wouldn't have been able to recall all that."

"W-Well... that might be true, but still..."

I flashed a smug grin.

"Or are you going to retract all your previous testimony? Are you saying that everything you've said so far was nothing more than a delusion seen through a dazed fog?"

"No! That's not it! It wasn't a delusion! I just—I was hit hard, and it made me hesitate! Besides, they were fighting over a gun! If I stepped in recklessly, the gun could've gone off at any moment!"

"I see. So you were too scared after being punched to help the defendant?"

"Y-Yes!"

"But earlier, you testified that you couldn't help because you were dazed. So you're retracting that testimony now?"

"Ugh..."

Kanioka's tone dropped.

"Well, I mean, maybe my memory was a little fuzzy... I—no, that's not it! I just got flustered and said that in the heat of the moment. This is my first time in court, after all."

"Mr. Kanioka, there's no need for unnecessary comments. I'll ask you again. You said earlier that you were too dazed to help. Are you now retracting that statement? Answer with a yes or no. You don't need to say anything else."

Kanioka hesitated for a long time, but finally, he was forced to answer.

"Y-Yes."

Got him. I grinned and moved on to the next question.

"Now, here's a question. How can we trust someone like you, who so easily changes their testimony?"

"O-Objection! That's an unnecessary question aimed at discrediting the witness!"

"Counsel, control yourself."

"My apologies, Your Honor. I'll move on to the next question."

I bowed deeply to the judge and turned back to the witness, whispering my next question from the side.

"Mr. Kanioka, here's my next question. Earlier, you testified that I instructed you to tamper with the evidence on the night of the incident. Why did you lie in that testimony?"

Everyone was left speechless, their mouths agape at my question.

"O-Objection! That question is baseless and amounts to nothing more than an accusation!"

"That's quite the accusation, Prosecutor Horiuchi. I believe I'm the one being accused without basis here."

"T-This witness saw and heard you instructing the evidence tampering! How can you say it's baseless when this witness has directly observed it?!"

"Well, I was also there, and I can categorically state that I never gave any such instruction to tamper with evidence. Therefore, this witness's testimony is nothing more than an unfounded accusation. Prosecutor Horiuchi, if you wish to argue otherwise, I would like you to present physical evidence, not just testimony."

"Ugh...!"

Heh, serves you right.

That's the beauty of the tampering I instructed. Even if a traitor like Kanioka appears, it's impossible to prove the gun barrel was filed down through physical evidence. As long as it's just testimony, I can counter it thoroughly in cross-examination.

"Hold on a moment, counsel."

It was the judge who stopped me.

"I understand what you're saying. But determining whether this witness's testimony is false is not up to you or Prosecutor Horiuchi. Therefore, I must dismiss your question that presumes the testimony is a lie. Is that clear, counsel?"

"Understood."

Well, it can't be helped.

I composed myself and turned back to Kanioka, glaring at him from the side.

"Now then—let me ask you one important question."

"W-What is it?"

"Mr. Kanioka. Before you took the witness stand today, you made a deal with the prosecution, didn't you?"

At this, Prosecutor Horiuchi sprang to his feet in a panic.

"O-Objection! That has nothing to do with this case!"

"The fact that you're so vehemently objecting, Prosecutor Horiuchi, suggests that a deal was indeed made."

"W-What are you talking about?! Don't make baseless claims!"

"Let me ask you directly, Prosecutor Horiuchi. Did you or did you not make a deal with this witness?"

"Hmph! I have no obligation to answer that!"

At that moment, the gavel banged loudly, and our argument was abruptly interrupted.

"Both of you, please restrain yourselves. There is absolutely no need for the two of you to engage in direct debate during this preliminary hearing. And while we're at it, I would appreciate it if you could consider how tiresome it is for me to have to scold you both over such trivial matters every time."

Needless to say, both Horiuchi and I quickly swore, "We're terribly sorry, it won't happen again." And I really meant it.

"However, Your Honor," I continued, "the prosecution's objection should still be overruled. Whether or not there was a plea bargain is directly relevant to determining the witness's position."

"...Hmm. You make a valid point. Very well, the witness will answer the question."

Kanioka, cornered, glanced over at Horiuchi. Realizing he had no choice but to answer, he slowly opened his mouth.

"Y-Yes, there was a deal, but..."

"So the deal was something like this, wasn't it? According to your testimony, you weren't directly involved in the victim's death. However, you did act in complicity, such as helping the defendant dispose of the body in the dam. If the defendant is found guilty, you wouldn't escape punishment either. But in exchange for your testimony as a witness for the prosecution, you're being spared that punishment. That's the nature of the deal, isn't it?"

"W-Well, yes, but..."

"Next question then. You voluntarily approached the police and offered this deal, didn't you?"

"...Ugh."

"The witness must answer the question," the judge interjected.

"Y-Yes, that's correct."

"I see. That's quite significant. From what we've heard in this trial so far, the police and prosecution have placed the utmost importance on your testimony, which led to the indictment in this case. In other words, this trial is essentially built on your testimony. In short, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the defendant was arrested, charged, and this trial commenced because you approached the police with this deal. So, if the defendant isn't found guilty, wouldn't you be viewed rather harshly, since you were the one who set this trial in motion?"

"...I-I don't know anything about that."

"In other words, since you made a deal with the prosecution, regardless of the truth, you have to get the defendant convicted, even if it means making ridiculous claims. Isn't that right?"

"T-That's not true! That's a baseless accusation!"

"Let me change the question, then. You said you were close to the defendant. So why did you betray him?"

"I-I'm a victim too! I was dragged into this by Ebiyama, and that's how I got involved in this whole mess! I didn't betray anyone—I just did what I had to do to protect myself!"

"I see, I understand now. So, you're a witness who holds ill will toward the defendant, who forcibly involved you in this situation?"

"...N-No, that's... not..."

I smiled and decided to deliver the final question that would finish him off.

"Let's summarize your testimony up to this point. You've had no hesitation in retracting your statements, you had no qualms about selling out a person you were close to, and in this trial, you harbor deep resentment toward the defendant for dragging you into this. On top of that, your reputation would be ruined if the defendant isn't convicted. You're that kind of witness, aren't you?"

"O-Objection, objection! Such a malicious question should not be allowed!"

Shut up, you shorty prosecutor.

"That concludes my cross-examination."

"…Very well," the judge replied, looking exhausted. "Let me remind the jury that the defense counsel's last statement was inappropriate and should not be taken into consideration. Please disregard it."

"Y-Your Honor!" Horiuchi jumped to his feet. "In any case, the cross- examination just now did nothing to dispel the suspicion that the defense counsel instructed evidence tampering! The prosecution renews its request for a charge of contempt of court!"

"Your Honor!" I stood up, unwilling to back down. "The claim Prosecutor Horiuchi just stated, that I instructed evidence tampering, is nothing more than an unsubstantiated allegation made by him and this witness. There is no credible physical evidence to support it! The charge of contempt of court is completely out of the question!"

The judge, looking rather troubled, grimaced as he spoke.

"Let's all calm down, defense counsel. You're right that there isn't sufficient evidence to definitively prove the defense tampered with the evidence. Therefore, I have no intention of charging you with contempt of court at this time. However, as the prosecution has noted, the suspicion has not been entirely cleared either. I will reserve judgment on the contempt charge until we see how the case develops further."

In other words, it's a vague, non-committal ruling that just postpones the decision.

Well, that’s fine for now. There’s no way any more evidence will surface proving I tampered with anything. The only people who witnessed the tampering were Ebiyama and his son, and I know for a fact neither of them will betray me.

Now then. That aside, there’s still one more thing I need to get back at Horiuchi for.

"Your Honor, the defense has one more matter to address, if I may."

"...What is it?"

He seemed slightly annoyed.

"As for the pistol and shell casings that the prosecution has submitted as evidence, while the bullet retrieved from the victim’s body is one thing, the pistol and shell casings found at the scene have yet to be definitively connected to this case. Therefore, I believe they should be removed from evidence."

"Y-Your Honor!" Horiuchi stood up again, refusing to back down. "The connection between this case and the evidence has already been made clear through Mr. Kanioka’s testimony!"

"However, Prosecutor Horiuchi," the judge interjected, "as pointed out by the defense during cross-examination, Kanioka’s testimony alone does not seem to sufficiently establish a clear connection, does it?"

"N-No, that’s not true! Besides, the defense hasn’t denied that the defendant shot the victim and discarded the gun at the scene! Therefore, it’s evident that the pistol we recovered from the scene is the murder weapon used in this case! While it’s true we can’t back it up with physical evidence like rifling marks, the circumstances clearly indicate its relevance!"

"Prosecutor Horiuchi," I interrupted, "can you categorically deny the possibility that someone removed the gun from the scene and replaced it with a completely different one?"

"T-That’s ridiculous! If we go down that road, there will be no end to it!"

"But that’s exactly what criminal trials are about, isn’t it? The prosecution is obligated to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Or have you forgotten that fundamental duty?"

"Grr... ugh..."

Horiuchi groaned, and the judge sighed before making his ruling.

"Here’s what we’ll do. The pistol and shell casings, submitted as evidence items A, B, and C by the prosecution, will be temporarily returned to the prosecution. Prosecutor Horiuchi, I ask that

you conduct a more thorough investigation of these items and see if there's any further evidence linking them to the case."

"T-That's fine, but what happens if we can't find any further evidence to establish a connection?"

"In that case, we will accept them again as prosecution evidence items A, B, and C. This is a preliminary hearing, not a formal trial. As long as evidence that supports a suspicion that the defendant committed the crime is submitted, that is sufficient. However, a preliminary hearing is also a place where we examine the evidence to ensure that the formal trial proceeds smoothly. If you, the prosecution, conduct another thorough investigation into the pistol and shell casings and find new evidence linking them to this case, it will be a significant advantage, whether in the preliminary hearing or the formal trial. Don't you agree?"

"W-Well, yes, you're right."

The judge had gotten rather skilled with words, hadn't he?

"Very well, then. That's my ruling. Defense, are you satisfied?"

"Uh, yes, that's fine."

Damn. So, in any case, the evidence will be admitted. Well, whatever. There's no way the prosecution will find any further evidence proving a connection. Once that becomes clear, I'll tear them apart again and might find another way to turn this to my advantage.

"Let's resume the hearing. Prosecutor Horiuchi, please call your next witness."

"Uh, Your Honor," Horiuchi said bitterly, "that was the last witness we had planned for today..."

"I see. In that case, we'll adjourn for today."

The judge went on to explain the usual instructions to the jury: not to discuss the case with anyone, and so on, before banging the gavel to officially end the day's proceedings.

<u>December 25th, 1:00 PM, Yamashika Law Office</u>

"...Something's bothering me. Something's not right."

Back at the office, I muttered to myself while sipping the green tea I'd made.

"Huh? Something wrong with your head? That's been the case for a while now, hasn't it?"

A snarky comment from the delinquent middle school girl, as usual.

"Don’t say unnecessary things! No one was talking about my head!"

"Oh, sorry, was it your face then? Either way, I think you should just give up. No doctor, no matter how skilled, could fix that face or that head of yours."

"Enough already! Leave my face and head out of this! Wait, is my face and head really that weird!? No, don’t answer that. You don’t need to answer! And anyway, I don’t have time for this pointless banter! I’m talking about the trial, you know!"

"...Jeez, you’re always so busy. Today’s trial? You handled it pretty well, didn’t you? I thought for sure this time your license to practice law was done for."

"Hmph, like I’d make such a blunder and lose my license. More importantly, your stupid remarks just reminded me. Satsuki, there’s something I want to ask you."

"Hmm? What?"

"Remember that witness, Kanioka, from today?"

"Oh, the guy who betrayed you two?"

"Yeah, him. I still can’t figure out why he suddenly betrayed us..."

"How would I know that? Don’t ask me."

"Yeah, I figured. By the way, Satsuki, changing the subject a bit, from what our Yukina said, you told her that my date with her on the 24th was canceled, right?"

"Heh, I see you remember."

"That’s not the point. What I want to know is, how did you know our date on the 24th was canceled?"

Surely not...

But if this brat had somehow carried out some malicious scheme on the night of the 22nd, which resulted in our date not being possible on the 24th, it would make sense.

And then Satsuki... grinned.

"Hohoho, you’ve got a good sense for this, Zenko. So how about this story? That night, there was some crooked lawyer tampering with evidence. But a certain beautiful young girl witnessed it. She secretly snuck into the trunk of his car and followed him. Naturally, as a righteous young girl, she couldn’t overlook such a crime, right? So she approached the mild-mannered young

man most likely to suffer from this case. She told him: 'From now on, you'll be tormented by the guilt of dumping a body into the dam and live in fear of the sound of police sirens. But if you go to the police, confess everything, and strike a plea deal to clear your name, you'll feel much better, won't you?'"

"W-Why you! So it was you all along, wasn't it!?"

This time, I nearly lost it. Thanks to her, I came within an inch of losing my law license. Unable to contain my fury, I glared at the little brat. This time, I wouldn't forgive her.

But the brat didn't seem afraid of me, not in the slightest.

"Ohohoho! Jumping to conclusions, Zenko. That was just a story I made up. It's all nonsense, y'know. There's not a shred of evidence to back it up. But hey, if you'd like, I'd love for you to prove that story true. That way, it would also prove that you tampered with the evidence!"

"U-Ugh!"

"Well, anyway, I have absolutely nothing to do with it. Instead of wasting time suspecting me, you should be preparing for tomorrow's trial. That'd be a much better use of your time."

...What the hell.

I, of all people, was being talked down to by a brat like this. I had no choice but to admit defeat today.

No! No, no, no, that's wrong!

That's right, what this brat just said was complete nonsense. Kanioka's betrayal had nothing to do with her. That's right, it has to be. There's no way my perfect plan could be derailed by a brat like this. Hahaha.

Kanioka simply felt guilty after doing something wrong and, driven by that guilt, ran to the police, hoping to save himself by confessing everything. Yes, that's it, that settles it. I should just forget about this and move on.

"Alright then. Ah, this green tea is delicious."

"Wow, that was the most blatant subject change ever."

I can't hear you. I can't hear you.

More importantly, I need to prepare for tomorrow's trial. Yes, there was something during today's trial that didn't sit right with me.

"Hey, Kageno. Didn’t you find anything strange about today’s hearing?"

"..."

No response.

"Hey, Kageno, are you listening?"

"...Zzzz."

"You fell asleep right after getting back to the office!?"

Huff, huff. Seriously, what's with these guys...

"Yawn... What’s your problem? I can sleep whenever and wherever I want."

'At least wait until we finish talking about work before you sleep in my office!' ...I wanted to yell at him, but I didn’t have the mental energy to waste any more brain cells on arguments unrelated to the case.

"...Fine, I was wrong. Forget it. I’ll figure it out myself."

It was my fault for ever relying on these freeloaders.

If only Yukina, the one reasonable person around here, were here... But thinking about Yukina just leads to regret over coffee at dawn after sleepless nights haunted by her eyes, so I’ll let it go.

Yes, more importantly...

Ever since today’s trial ended, I’ve had this nagging feeling that I’ve forgotten something important.

In this case, no physical evidence directly linking the defendant to the crime has been presented. All we have is Kanioka’s testimony, after he betrayed us.

And after grilling Kanioka that much, if the trial continues as it is, we might be able to win without even having to claim self-defense. Since the necessary requirement for establishing a preliminary hearing—a "suspicion that the defendant committed murder"—hasn’t been met, we might be able to pull off a victory yet.

...Or at least, that’s how it should be.

But something’s bothering me. It feels like there’s something I’m overlooking. I don’t know what it is, but because of it, this uneasy feeling won’t leave my mind.

Damn it, I don’t get it. With the lack of evidence, this trial shouldn’t even be happening in the first place. But Kanioka’s betrayal allowed it to proceed, and combined with all of today’s testimony, it feels like I’ve missed something crucial. I can’t shake the feeling that this oversight, more than Kanioka’s testimony itself, could determine the outcome of the trial.

Damn it, damn it! Thinking about it isn’t helping.

As a lawyer, there’s only one thing I can do at times like this. No matter what damning evidence or testimony may come out later, I need to have an insurance plan ready to overturn the trial.

"Kageno, you awake?"

"...I’d prefer it if you assumed I was asleep."

"Just listen. There’s something I need you to get for me."

"If you’re asking me, it’s probably nothing good."

There goes that brat with her unnecessary remarks again.

"You guys have too many weird assumptions about me. It’s nothing illegal. I just want you to get me a Tokarev bullet. Price doesn’t matter; I’ll claim it as necessary expenses anyway."

Kageno sat up and gave me a groggy, irritated look.

"...That’s definitely illegal. I don’t know much about gun laws or whatever, but is it really okay for a lawyer to be getting their hands on bullets without permission?"

"Don’t jump to conclusions. I don’t need live ammo. I just want a spent bullet with no gunpowder or casing. Carrying around a hunk of metal doesn’t count as a punishable offense."

"Ah, I see. That might not technically be illegal, but... what the hell do you plan to do with a spent bullet?"

I grinned.

"That’s a fair question, but I can’t answer it right now. Just know I’m only using it to prove my client’s innocence. You’re not going to be an accessory to any crime."

Kageno grimaced, as if he’d just swallowed something bitter.

"Whenever you give me such a logical explanation, I always get the feeling it'll lead to something terrible... But fine. Handing over a useless hunk of metal that has nothing to do with the case won't get me in trouble, so I'll do it."

"I'm counting on you. And make sure it's a bit rusted, too. I need it by tomorrow night, no matter what."

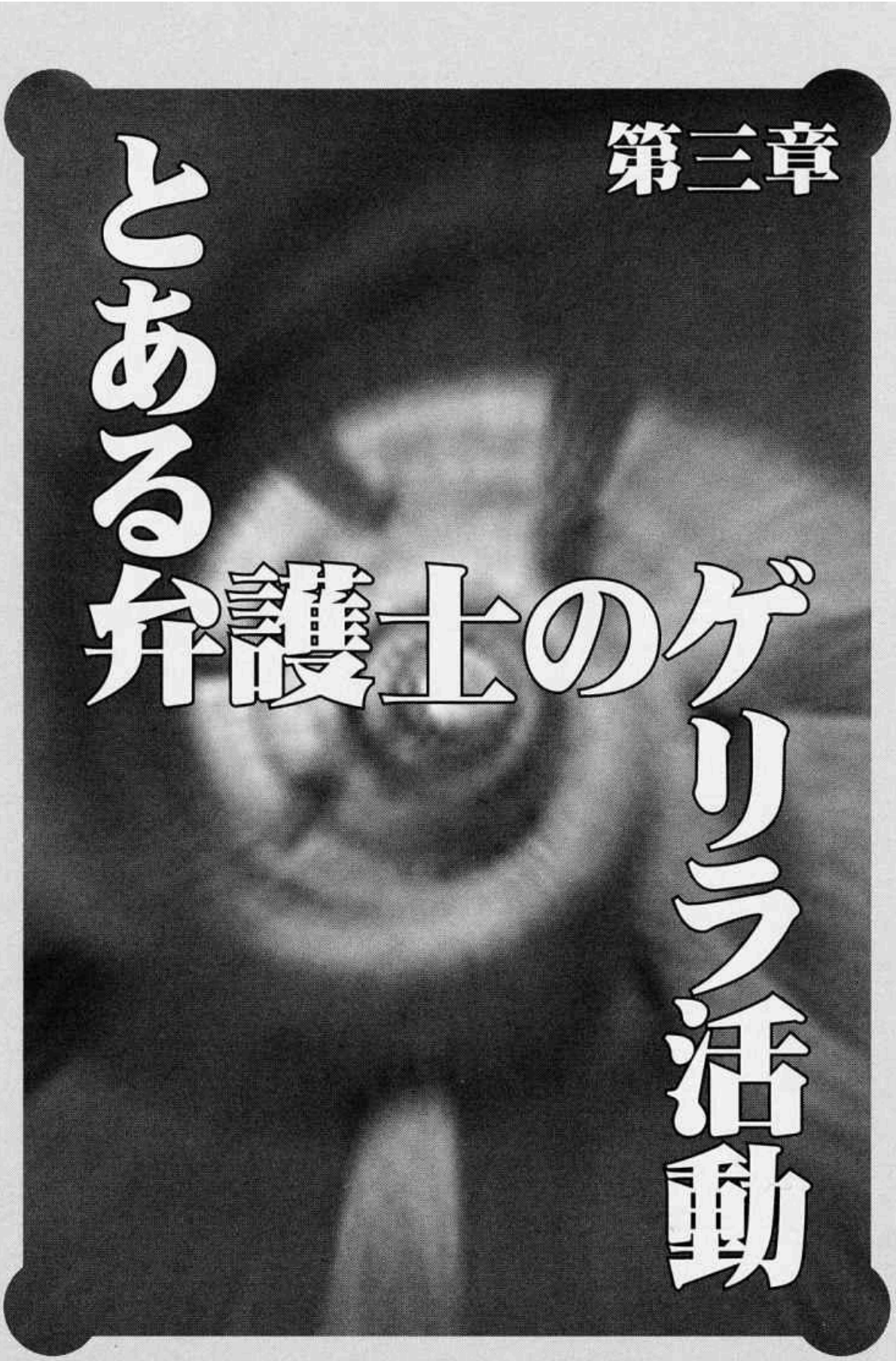
"Still as picky as ever, huh? Well, Tokarevs were all the rage in Japan a while back, so I should be able to find a spent bullet somewhere."

Great. That should give me some insurance.

That said, having insurance doesn't eliminate all the risks. In fact, taking out this kind of insurance creates new risks in itself. I'd prefer not to use it if I can avoid it...

Anyway, as long as tomorrow's trial goes off without a hitch, everything will be fine.

But unfortunately, if my memory serves me right, not a single trial I've ever been involved in has gone off without a hitch.



第三章

とある弁護士のゲリラ活動

Chapter 3: A Certain Lawyer's Guerrilla Activity

December 26th, 9:59 AM, District Court, Courtroom No. 3

Yesterday, I had this lingering bad feeling. How great would it have been if it had just been a baseless premonition.

But ever since I walked into the courtroom and saw Prosecutor Horiuchi's smug face, grinning nonstop, I couldn't shake the sense that it wasn't just in my head. That shorty prosecutor—yesterday, at the end of the trial, he was gnashing his teeth in frustration.

And so, even when the judge declared the trial resumed, I couldn't get rid of the anxiety gnawing at me.

Finally, the shorty prosecutor called the witness's name.

"The first witness for the prosecution today is Mr. Hiroshi Ikamura."

...Who? I've never heard that name before.

The man who took the stand looked to be in his late thirties. He was well-dressed in a three-piece suit: a navy tie, a tailored jacket, and slacks. His shoes were a stylish dark brown leather.

Despite his sharp appearance, something about his demeanor didn't scream "businessman." In fact, there was something familiar about the air of detachment, like someone shunned by society.

Yes, it was almost as if... he had the aura of some shady private detective.

There was one other thing that caught my attention.

He seemed to have an injury on his left leg, as he walked with a slight limp. He looked like an octopus stranded on land. Not that I'd ever seen an octopus out of water.

"Let's get right to it, Mr. Ikamura. Could you please testify about your profession?"

"Yes. I work as a private investigator."

Ah, so he's in the same line of work as Kageno.

“Now, on the day of the incident, December 22nd, where were you, and what were you doing?”

“Yes. That day, I was tailing the defendant in this case, Mr. Akio Ebiyama, all day long, at the request of a client.”

...Huh?

Tailing him? The defendant? All day long?

...

...

...W-What!?

“You were watching the defendant all day on the day of the incident?”

“Yes.”

“So, you were aware of everything that happened around the defendant that day?”

“That’s correct.”

What the hell?

Are all private detectives just that idle? Why was he wasting his time tailing a simple college kid like Akio Ebiyama?

...Wait a second. Maybe this isn’t as far-fetched as it seems. Akio’s father, Haruhiko Ebiyama, is a well-known politician. He must have plenty of enemies. The Communist Party, rival candidates in the same electoral district, and so on. It wouldn’t be surprising if one of them hired a detective to tail his son, hoping to dig up some scandal to bring down the father.

But either way, with a witness like this, the situation is heading in a bad direction.

I managed to completely discredit Kanioka's testimony yesterday, making sure no one trusted him. That was only possible because Kanioka was the sole person who could testify in detail about the incident. If a second witness now comes forward to corroborate Kanioka's testimony, the credibility of their statements will skyrocket. That’s just how human psychology works.

“Now, I’d like you to testify in detail about the actions of the defendant on December 22nd,” the shorty prosecutor said, glancing smugly at me, “but to avoid prolonging the trial with irrelevant details, let’s focus on around 5 PM that day. Please tell us what you observed during that time.”

“Understood. At that time, I was following the subject to Ryugu Dam.”

What Ikamura described next was, for the most part—or rather, entirely—the same as what Kanioka had testified to yesterday. He said he was watching from about thirty meters away, hidden behind a rock, and since it was dark, he couldn’t see the finer details. However, he clearly saw the defendant and the victim struggling, and eventually, the defendant managed to seize the gun. Shortly after, he heard one gunshot, and then, after a brief pause, a second gunshot. After the second shot, the victim collapsed and didn’t move.

It perfectly reinforced Kanioka’s testimony. Clearly, he and the shorty prosecutor had rehearsed this thoroughly, leaving no room for cross-examination. I hadn’t denied that Ebiyama had struggled with the victim and fired the gun during yesterday’s testimony either. Since I might later need to argue self-defense, I couldn’t afford to deny that part. But now, with this testimony, there was no longer any room to dispute how the incident had occurred.

“Now, after witnessing the defendant throw the victim’s body into the dam, what did you do?”

“I waited for the two of them to leave. After that, I went back to my car, intending to resume tailing them. However, given the gravity of the situation, I thought it necessary to report to my client first. So, I made a phone call, and my client instructed me to return and report in person. As a result, I discontinued the tailing and returned to my client.”

Phew, that’s a relief. At least this detective didn’t witness the tampering with the evidence.

But then, Prosecutor Horiuchi moved on to ask a question that would lead to an even more shocking revelation.

“By the way, are you aware that this case came to light because of an anonymous phone call made to the dam’s management office?”

“Yes, of course. After all, I’m the one who made that call.”

...

...

So that’s it. I knew something was off, something I had overlooked—and this was it.

It makes sense now. Kanioka betrayed us by reporting this incident to the police, but if that were the case, there wouldn’t have been any need for an anonymous tip to the dam’s management office.

This is probably how it went down: the detective who was tailing Ebiyama—this Ikamura guy—anonymously reported the incident to the dam. The case came to light, and the police

announced that they were launching an investigation. Kanioka, who doesn't seem like the type to withstand pressure or adversity, probably panicked. There might have been some meddling by that brat, too. Anyway, spooked by the media coverage, Kanioka decided to protect himself by going to the police and spilling everything. If you think about it that way, Kanioka's sudden betrayal starts to make more sense.

The fact that there was another witness to the incident besides Kanioka—that's what had been bothering me since yesterday's testimony. And I should have realized it at that stage. I had gotten too comfortable after thoroughly discrediting Kanioka, the prosecution's only witness.

...Then again, even if I had anticipated another witness coming forward, it's not like I could've done anything to prepare for it.

"I see, so you were the one who made the anonymous phone call," Prosecutor Horiuchi continued. "But if you were a witness to the incident, why didn't you report it to the police right away?"

That's a good question from Horiuchi. It's clearly suspicious.

"I am merely a hired detective. My client takes precedence over reporting to the police. Even if it's not the most moral course of action. My duty was to report what happened around Mr. Akio Ebiyama to my client first, before the police. Whether or not to report the incident was entirely up to my client. That's why I didn't make any reports on the day of the incident. It wasn't until the following day that my client told me it was okay to report it, so I anonymously informed the dam manager."

"Why did you call the dam manager and not the police?"

"If I had reported it directly to the police, there would have been unwanted evidence, like call records."

"Then, why are you, someone who went so far to avoid contact with the police, now willingly standing here on the witness stand giving testimony?"

"The truth is, I was listening in on yesterday's trial. I realized that my testimony might be necessary to prove this case."

"I... I have no further questions."

Prosecutor Horiuchi ended his questioning with a slight twitch in his cheek.

Well, it's no wonder. This witness, Ikamura, was essentially saying, "You prosecutors are so incompetent that I came here to help; you should be thankful."

But—so that's the story. It does seem to make sense.

"Defense counsel, your cross-examination."

The judge urged me, and I stood up slowly, taking my time to think about what I should ask.

"Mr. Ikamura, let me begin by asking, who exactly is your client?"

"I can't disclose anything about my client."

Ikamura responded firmly and without hesitation.

"But, Mr. Ikamura, this is a trial, and you are here as a witness. Since detectives are not granted any privilege of confidentiality, you are obliged to answer the questions posed to you. If you do not, you could be charged with contempt of court."

"I don't mind at all. If I were to expose my client just because I'm threatened with a charge, no one would ever hire me again. You're welcome to charge me with contempt of court if you wish, but I will not talk."

Hmm, stubborn.

But I suppose that's understandable, given that someone hiring a detective to dig up dirt on a high-profile politician like Haruhiko Ebiyama could be a very powerful person. I can see why he'd refuse to talk. If I were in Ikamura's shoes, I'd probably do the same.

At that moment, the judge glanced at me. He seemed to be saying, "If you're going to request a contempt charge, do it quickly."

Hmm, no matter how much I threaten him, I don't think this witness will reveal his client's identity. As much as I'd like to use whatever means necessary to dig it out of him, to the spectators, it would just look like I'm bullying the witness. Since I may need to argue self-defense in this case, I have to be mindful of public opinion to some degree.

That being the case, the conclusion is clear. There's no point in asking him anything further at this time.

Fortunately, it seems that this man, Ikamura, didn't witness us tampering with the evidence at the scene. So while the defendant's situation has become a bit more disadvantageous, my law license—my top priority—remains untouched. For now, I'll leave the matter of his client to Kageno to investigate. There's no need to dig any deeper at this moment.

"That will be all. I have no further questions."

"I see. The witness may step down. Prosecutor Horiuchi, please call your next witness."

"Understood. The prosecution will now call its final witness, Detective Inaba, to the stand once again."

Ikamura limped away from the stand, and in his place, the large, imposing figure of Detective Inaba took the stand.

And here, once again—Prosecutor Horiuchi gave me a sly grin.

...Give me a break. I appreciate his obvious facial expressions, but I could do without another troublesome testimony.

"Now, Detective Inaba, let me ask you. Yesterday, you and your team discovered new evidence, correct?"

"Yes."

More evidence? Seriously?

"You have that evidence with you, I assume?"

"Yes, here it is."

With that, Detective Inaba produced—Prosecution's Exhibit A—the handgun that the judge had ordered to be re-examined.

"Detective Inaba, could you explain what this newly discovered evidence is?"

"It's evidence that definitively proves the defendant used this handgun."

A murmur spread through the gallery.

Simultaneously, a chill ran down my spine.

"Very well. Please tell us how you came to discover this evidence."

"Yes. Yesterday, we were ordered to re-examine Prosecution's Exhibits A, B, and C, which are the handgun and the spent casings found at the scene. Upon further investigation of the handgun, we discovered some additional evidence."

"And what is that evidence?"

"It’s the defendant’s blood."

Another murmur swept through the gallery.

At the same time, a queasy sensation stirred in the pit of my stomach.

"Detective Inaba, why was this blood not discovered until now?"

"There’s a reason for that. The blood was found in a rather unusual spot on the handgun."

"And where was that?"

"The Tokarev handgun used in this case is commonly known as a semi-automatic pistol. With such pistols, after each shot is fired, the recoil causes the slide—the upper part of the gun—to move back, ejecting the spent casing and chambering the next round. The defendant’s blood was found on the inside of this slide, which is why it went unnoticed until now."

"Can you explain why the defendant’s blood was in such an unusual location?"

"I can explain that quite simply. The slide is a heavy piece of the gun that moves back and forth at high speed when a shot is fired, and its edges are quite sharp. If someone inexperienced with handling firearms holds the gun incorrectly, the slide can pinch the skin at the base of the thumb when it moves back and forth."

"I see. So the skin gets cut, and blood is left behind?"

"Exactly. It’s a common occurrence in countries like the United States, where gun crime is more prevalent."

Just as I was silently cursing the situation, the defendant, Ebiyama, did something he absolutely should not have done.

He instinctively clutched the base of his right thumb with his left hand, as though he had just realized something. And he did this right as the eyes of the jury and the spectators were all fixed on him!

I wanted to scream at him for being an idiot, but I couldn’t.

It was too late. If I made any sudden moves now, it would only draw more attention to him, and I couldn’t afford that.

Come to think of it, I remembered something. When Ebiyama was receiving medical treatment from Ujigami at my office, I noticed that, for some reason, he was also treating the base of his

thumb. I wondered why he had gotten injured in such a strange place, but... now it all makes sense.

"Detective Inaba, I assume you conducted a DNA test on the blood, correct?"

"Yes."

"And the result?"

"It matched the defendant."

Prosecutor Horiuchi looked at me with a satisfied and pleased expression, as if to show off. Go to hell.

"By the way, Detective Inaba, you took photos of the defendant's injuries to investigate how he fought with the victim, didn't you?"

"Yes, as you say."

"Among those, there is a photograph of the defendant's right hand, correct?"

"Yes, I have it here."

"Show it to us."

The photo that Detective Inaba produced clearly showed the hand, palm down, with a small tear-like wound on the base of the right thumb, obvious to anyone.

This is bad. If possible, I'd like to argue in cross-examination that "the prosecution fabricated this evidence to gain an advantage in the trial! It's far too unnatural that the bloodstain suddenly appeared when it hadn't been found until yesterday!" But...

The fact is, the defendant does have a laceration on his right hand. No one's going to believe me if I claim it's been faked.

This is bad. Really bad.

"Your Honor," the shorty prosecutor turned to face the front of the court. "With this, it has been established that the gun found at the crime scene is related to this case. However, despite this connection, the rifling marks on the bullet found inside the victim's body do not match the firearm. This supports yesterday's witness, Mr. Kanioka's, testimony that 'the evidence was tampered with under the defense attorney's instruction.'

The prosecution would like to submit the handgun and cartridge casings as official evidence once again, as well as submit this photograph of the defendant's hand as Prosecution Exhibit E. Additionally, I believe it is only appropriate for the defense counsel, Mr. Yamashika, to also be charged with contempt of court."

"Very well, I see no reason to reject the evidence."

The judge quickly ruled, glaring at me from the corner of his eye.

"However, I will not apply contempt of court charges. True, this increases the suspicion that the evidence was tampered with. However, it cannot be definitively proven that this was under the direct instruction of the defense counsel based on a single witness's testimony. It's unfortunate, but..."

...

What's with that last remark? Do you really want to charge me with contempt of court that badly? ...No, I don't want to know the answer.

This is bad. This is an enormous crisis. We had gone through so much trouble to tamper with the handgun evidence, and now it's all for nothing. Worse yet, it's completely backfired!

Damn it, am I cursed in this trial? If I tamper with evidence, I get caught, and if I argue that the prosecution's handgun is unfit as evidence, they just find new grounds to prove their case. "Honesty doesn't pay"—that saying must be about me.

Detective Inaba's questioning continued.

"Now, Detective Inaba, let's return to the main issue. Are there any pieces of evidence that have not yet been presented in this court?"

"Yes, there are."

Detective Inaba pulled out another large, enlarged photograph.

I wasn't sure what it was at first, but it appeared to be a picture of a rock.

"What is this a photograph of?"

"It's a picture of a rock found near the crime scene. The scene is right by the dam, but the opposite side of the dam is a steep slope, and rocks of various sizes are scattered across it. During our thorough investigation of the scene, we discovered relatively fresh impact marks on several large rocks a few meters up from the crime scene."

"This photo shows one of those marks?"

"Yes. We found three such marks. All of them appeared relatively new."

Prosecutor Horiuchi walked over to me, grinning, and placed several photos on my desk.

Just as Detective Inaba had said, the photos showed large rocks covered with rockfall prevention nets. Indeed, there were white, powdery marks that looked like something had struck them. It certainly seemed like fresh impact marks, just as he described.

"Now, Detective Inaba, what can we infer from these newly submitted pieces of evidence?"

"Yes, let me explain.

First, I'd like you to recall the testimony of Dr. Eboshi from yesterday. He mentioned the entry wound on the victim's back, which was a vertical, jagged wound. This suggests the bullet did not hit the victim in a straight trajectory but rather in an irregular one, meaning the bullet ricocheted off something before hitting the victim. Additionally, the bullet extracted from the victim's body also showed signs of having hit something, and as you can see from these photos, there are at least two marks on the rocks near the crime scene that suggest something hard struck them. Furthermore, both eyewitnesses testified that the victim collapsed and stopped moving immediately after the second gunshot.

When you combine all this evidence, there can only be one conclusion. During the struggle between the defendant and the victim, two shots were fired. The first shot missed, but the second shot passed by the victim's temple, hit the rock, ricocheted, and struck the victim in the back."

It's logical, supported by evidence, and makes sense.

The spectators, too, seemed convinced as they silently nodded in agreement.

The defendant fired two shots, and the victim was killed by one of them. Without a doubt, Detective Inaba's testimony just now is the truth of this case. Not that it matters if I'm convinced...

"Thank you, Detective Inaba. Your Honor, the prosecution would like to submit this photograph of the rocks as Prosecution Exhibit F and conclude our case."

"Defense, any objections to the evidence?"

"...None."

"Very well, the evidence is accepted. Defense, you may begin your cross-examination."

I couldn’t just stay silent.

I stood up to question what had caught my attention.

"Let me ask about the marks on the rocks depicted in this photograph. First, Detective Inaba, you can’t prove when these marks were made, can you?"

"Well, no. But it's clear that they are relatively new marks."

"You took this photograph on the 23rd, the day you began your investigation, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then, what exactly do you mean by ‘relatively new’? From when to when are you referring?"

Detective Inaba paused for a moment, thinking.

"...At the very least, I believe they were made within a day, sometime between the 22nd and the 23rd."

"By the way, are you an expert on rocks?"

"...Huh? No, I wouldn’t say that."

"Then what is your basis for believing that the marks on the rocks are new?"

"Well, you can see that the marks in the photo are covered in a white powder. When rocks are chipped, they produce this kind of powder, and since it hasn’t been blown away by wind or rain, I concluded that the marks are fresh."

"I see. Now, as shown in the photo, that slope is covered with a rockfall prevention net, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"With that in mind, let me ask you this: Can you distinguish whether these marks were made by a ricocheting bullet or by rocks colliding due to a rockslide?"

"Yes. I can say with certainty that these marks were not caused by a rockslide."

...What?

"W-Why is that?"

"It’s hard to tell just from the photograph, but this was taken from below the rock on the slope. In other words, the marks are on the lower part of the rock, not the upper part. Even if there had been a rockslide, there’s no way the lower part would have been struck. If you have any doubts, I suggest you visit the crime scene yourself to verify."

Damn it, if that’s the case, why didn’t you bring a clearer photo in the first place?!

I see, now that it's been said, it makes sense. Ebiyama was pinned in a mount position by Kaishiba at the bottom of the slope. From that position, if he fired the gun and the bullet ricocheted, hitting the victim Kaishiba, then it must have hit the lower part of the rock.

"B-But, Detective Inaba, even if that’s the case, you can’t determine whether the mark on the rock was man-made or caused by a ricochet, can you?"

"Yes, that’s true. But honestly, I can’t think of any reason other than a ricochet for a mark to appear in such a place."

"…No further questions."

"Very well. That will conclude today’s proceedings. Tomorrow, we will begin with the defense’s rebuttal. Counsel Yamashika, please make sure you are well-prepared."

"Yes, leave it to me."

I lied.

This is hopeless.

The clever trick I pulled with the gun and shell casings is useless now, and there are two witnesses who claim to have seen the defendant actually shoot the victim.

There’s no way I can win this with a straightforward approach. I guess I have no choice but to do it. The method I’ve been thinking about since yesterday, the one that will turn everything around in a single move.

<u>December 26th, 1:05 PM, Yamashika Law Office</u>

When I returned to the office, I immediately asked Kageno.

"Hey, Kageno. Did you manage to get that thing I asked for yesterday?"

"Yeah, more or less."

Kageno pulled a bullet out of his coat pocket, wrapped in a plastic bag like it was evidence, and tossed it to me.

"As requested, a used Tokarev bullet, the same kind that was used in this case. It's a bit scratched since it's been used, but that shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"Yeah, this'll do just fine."

With this, the necessary props are ready. Now, there's just one more thing—

"Kageno, I've got one more favor to ask. You've got a connection in the police, right? I want you to get in touch with one of the investigators working on this case. Preferably someone eager to make a name for themselves."

"Get in touch? You're not thinking of bribing them, are you?"

"Bribe them? Ha! Do I look like the kind of lawyer who would do something illegal? …No, don't answer that. Anyway, this will be a good deal for the investigator too. After all, they'll get a chance to make a mark."

"Wow, this is starting to stink even worse!" That brat, who wasn't even called in, butted in again. "A 'good guy' lawyer helping the police make a name for themselves? He's definitely up to something, this scam lawyer. Seriously, you should just stop now."

"Shut up, you outsider. Stay quiet."

"Hmph. What's with that attitude? Didn't you already try to tamper with evidence once and get caught? You're not a kid, you should know that when you tell one lie, you need another to cover it up. If you try another cheap trick and get caught again, this time your law license will really be done for."

What an unnecessary lecture.

Once this trial is over, I really hope something like a "Communist Middle School Girl Murder Case" happens next, I thought from the bottom of my heart.

"Yamashika, as for me, I'd like to offer you one piece of advice."

Even Kageno, in an unusually calm tone, started to speak.

"…What is it now?"

"To be honest, the brat's right. This trial's a bust. After screwing up that badly, trying to turn things around with some cheap trick now seems a bit too optimistic, don't you think?"

"Heh, you're naive. Just because the last trick failed doesn't mean this one will too. Besides, I'm already neck-deep in this mess. What do you think will happen if we just let this preliminary hearing finish without doing anything? Without a doubt, Horiuchi is going to charge me with evidence tampering. Sure, once it goes to trial, I'll be able to weasel my way out of it, but the moment I become known as 'the lawyer charged with evidence tampering,' who knows what those stiff-necked bastards at the bar association will do to me? No, this is the only path left for me. The only way is to muddy the waters and win."

Kageno sighed and gave up trying to convince me.

"Fine. As long as I get paid, it's none of my business. I'll do as you say, though I don't know what'll come of it. How should I approach this ambitious investigator?"

"Ah, right. Tomorrow's hearing starts at 10 AM, and it'll take about 30 minutes to get from Ryugu Dam to the courthouse, so…"

I pulled out a newspaper and, using a marker, sketched a rough map of the crime scene for Kageno to see.

Combining the testimonies we've heard so far with what I personally learned from Akio Ebiyama, I pinpointed a spot where it wouldn't be unnatural for something to turn up. Additionally, it had to be a place far enough from the crime scene that the police hadn't thoroughly searched it, but still easily accessible by car. There's only one place like that.

I circled the area east of the crime scene on the national highway with the marker.

"Tell them this: 'Around 9 AM tomorrow, use a metal detector to search this area thoroughly, and you'll find something that'll help you make a name for yourself.' Oh, and don't ask why."

"…You don't need to explain. I've got a pretty good idea what you're planning. But why 9 AM specifically?"

I grinned.

"I said don't ask why. You'll understand tomorrow."

"…I don't care what happens. Fine, I'll find a suitable investigator and tell them, but I can't guarantee they'll do as you want."

"They will. Think about it, have I ever failed to make things go my way?"

"…Just do whatever you want."

This next move of mine is the perfect trump card to completely turn this case around. There's no way I could fail. Horiuchi will be so confused, running back and forth, that he'll have no choice but to ask for an extension. And after that, the trial will never be reopened. I'm sure of it.

"Oh, by the way, Kageno. Do you know anything about that detective named Ikamura who showed up today? He's a fellow detective, right?"

I asked, not really expecting much. I've always known that Kageno's circle of friends is unusually small.

But to my surprise, Kageno nodded.

"I know him. He's an excellent detective."

"Top-notch?"

"Yeah, top-notch. Back when I was a detective trainee, I even attended some of his lectures."

"…That's a problem."

The prosecution's witnesses are best when they're as incompetent as possible.

"Anything else you know about him?"

"I don't know much. He used to run a respected detective agency, but something happened, and he had to shut it down. I don't know what happened after that."

"I see. Well, look into him for me. He seemed really touchy about revealing his client's name. If we can figure out who his client is, we might be able to use it to pressure him."

"…You really are something else… No, never mind. I'm not saying anything anymore."

What's the deal with these people?

Anyway, this will do. The preparations are complete.

Now, all that's left is to wait for nightfall.

And then tomorrow, the trial will conclude, and the day after tomorrow, as planned, I've got a date. I've got money. This time of year, I can book any hotel I want.

I'm going to take back Christmas.

真実はいつも
たった一つしかない
第四章

Chapter 4: The Truth Is Always Only One

December 27th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom 3

On this day, I was sleepy from the morning.

There wasn't anything particularly significant about it. I had been driving around until 2 AM the night before, taking care of various things that needed to be done.

Of course, heading into the trial like this was a bit tough. But all of this was necessary to wrap up the case today and ensure I could still make it to my year-end date with Yukina, which would likely be my last chance. This was the moment to push through.

"Alright, we will now resume the trial," said the judge. "Defense counsel, please begin."

"Understood."

Suppressing my drowsiness, I switched gears mentally. There was no way I could afford to show up in court yawning in such a serious setting.

I checked the clock. 10 AM. By now, the greedy investigator I had urged into action might have already found the thing. I had given them a fairly decent indication of the location, and with a metal detector, it was almost guaranteed to be found.

Which meant I couldn't afford to take it too slow either. I had to demonstrate my leading interrogation technique and guide things swiftly in the direction I envisioned.

"Well then, as the first witness for the defense, I'd like to call Detective Inaba to the stand."

Today, like always, Detective Inaba stood at the witness stand with his usual scowl—no, more like a beastly face. Timing it just right, I first addressed the judge.

"Your Honor. This witness belongs to the prosecution. Given that it's clear he harbors malice—whoops, pardon me, that was too harsh—given that it's clear he holds a bias against my client and intends to condemn him, I believe I should be allowed to ask leading questions."

"Hmm. I'm not entirely opposed to your request, but—" The judge looked rather exasperated. "In your case, I feel like you ask leading questions even without permission."

"Please, let's not dwell on that."

Since I was aware of it myself, I couldn’t argue back.

No matter. It’s a minor detail. I refocused and turned to face the witness stand.

"Alright, then, Detective Inaba. First, I’d like to confirm something."

"Yes."

"Up until now, the prosecution has submitted as evidence one handgun, two shell casings, and one bullet retrieved from the victim’s body. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that’s correct."

"Don’t you feel like something’s missing?"

Perhaps because of the unexpected question, Detective Inaba blinked in confusion.

"…What do you mean?"

"It’s quite simple, really."

I raised two fingers in a V-shape.

"Look, there were two shell casings found at the scene. This means two bullets were fired. Correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

I folded one finger down.

"But at the same time, only one bullet has been submitted as evidence. So where did the other bullet go?"

"Uh, well…"

"‘Uh, well’ isn’t an answer. Why hasn’t your team found that bullet?"

"Why…? Well, the testimony from the two eyewitnesses clearly states that the bullet didn’t hit anyone and just flew off somewhere. It’s not really a crucial piece of evidence."

"Oh? You’re saying it’s not crucial evidence?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"On what basis do you make that claim?"

"Well, there's already plenty of evidence to prove the defendant's guilt, isn't there?"

"Do you really believe that?"

"O-Of course I do."

"Then let's talk about the prosecution's evidence item D—the bullet retrieved from the victim's body. When you compared the rifling marks on that bullet with those from the gun found at the scene, they didn't match, did they?"

"…That's true, but the reason the rifling marks didn't match is because you tampered with them—"

"Please, spare us the unnecessary commentary. Just answer whether they matched or not."

With a sour look, Detective Inaba replied,

"They did not match."

"Very well. So, since the rifling marks didn't match, you cannot say with 100% certainty that the bullet found in the victim's body was fired from the gun found at the scene, correct? Please answer yes or no."

"…If you put it like that, then yes, I have no choice but to agree."

"But you're claiming that the rifling marks didn't match because someone tampered with the inside of the gun barrel, right?"

"Exactly."

"But you have no evidence to support that claim, aside from the testimony of a single witness, correct?"

"Well… that's true."

"Now, imagine if your team were to find the second bullet that's still missing. You could then compare the rifling marks on that bullet with those on the one retrieved from the victim's body. If the rifling marks on both bullets match, it would mean both bullets were fired from the same gun. Isn't that correct?"

"…Yes, that's correct."

"But on the other hand, if the rifling marks on the two bullets don't match, that would mean the two bullets were fired from different guns. In that case, there would have been at least two guns involved in this incident. And since we haven't found a bullet that matches the rifling marks of the gun at the scene, it's even possible that there were three guns involved: one that fired the first bullet, another that fired the second bullet, and the gun found at the scene. That would change the entire nature of this case. Don't you agree?"

"Objection!" The shorty prosecutor jumped to his feet. "There's no need to answer such speculative, baseless questions!"

"I'll acknowledge the objection, and the question will be withdrawn. However," I continued, "Prosecutor Horiuchi may claim it's baseless, but if we find another bullet near the crime scene and its rifling marks don't match any of the guns or bullets already presented, that would support my argument. Detective Inaba, wouldn't it?"

"Objection! For the same reasons, I object again!"

"Sustained. The defense will change the question."

"Very well. I will ask Detective Inaba a different question."

"..."

Detective Inaba's face grew tense.

"Detective Inaba. Is it possible that your team has already found the second bullet? But because the rifling marks didn't match any of the guns or bullets, as I just suggested, you've decided to conceal the existence of that bullet and falsely claim it hasn't been found?"

The courtroom erupted in murmurs.

Accusing the prosecution of hiding evidence was highly impactful and effective.

"Y-Your Honor! This is an entirely unfounded question! It's speculative, inflammatory, and has no relevance or importance to this case. I strongly object!"

I wasn't about to back down.

"But Prosecutor Horiuchi, I find it hard to believe. Could it really be possible that the police of our country, which is said to be among the best in the world, are incapable of finding a single bullet?"

"I-I object again! The firing range of a handgun is over 300 meters. That alone makes the search area more than 200,000 square meters. And depending on the angle and wind direction, the

area could be even larger. Moreover, the area near the crime scene is bordered by a dam on one side and a forest on the other. If the bullet sank to the bottom of the dam, it would be impossible to retrieve. Even if it got lodged in a tree, it would be extremely difficult to find."

"Still, Prosecutor Horiuchi," I immediately shot back from my seat, "it's a fact that two bullets were fired, one of which has yet to be found. Depending on the rifling marks on that bullet, the entire course of this trial could be overturned. It's clear that continuing the trial without such crucial evidence is utterly unreasonable. Therefore, I propose as a necessary measure to protect the rights of the defendant, that we postpone the proceedings until that bullet is found."

As my argument with Horiuchi became more heated, the murmurs from the gallery grew louder.

"Order! The gallery must remain silent!"

The judge banged his gavel—just then.

There was a new development in the courtroom.

Suddenly, two people entered.

One was dressed in a suit, the other in work clothes. They didn't seem suspicious at first glance.

Normally, such a disruption would draw everyone's attention, but due to the rising noise in the courtroom, not many in the gallery noticed.

Then, the man in the suit confidently entered the restricted area meant for court officials and approached Prosecutor Horiuchi, whispering something in his ear.

Horiuchi's face immediately lit up.

"Your Honor! I've just received a report. New evidence has been found at the crime scene, and the forensic results are in! The procedure might be a little disrupted, but could we have one of our investigators testify immediately? This would swiftly dismiss the defense's claims."

"I see. If that's the case, I believe we should allow some flexibility in the procedure. Defense counsel, what do you think?"

"Well, since this all stems from my own argument, I have no objections as long as I retain the right to cross-examine later."

"Of course. Very well, although a bit unorthodox, we will have Detective Inaba step down for the time being. Prosecutor Horiuchi, who will be your witness?"

"Yes. We will call Investigator Yoshida."

I barely managed to suppress the urge to grin.

Prosecutor Horiuchi, you've taken the bait. Common sense would tell you there's no way such conveniently timed evidence would just pop up. If you had any self-awareness, you'd realize that immediately.

"Please state your name."

"My name is Shoichi Yoshida."

"You are one of the investigators assigned to this case, correct?"

"That's correct."

"Until just now, you were near the crime scene at Ryugu Dam, isn't that right?"

"Yes. The investigation at the scene was mostly completed, but for certain reasons, we were conducting a re-investigation this morning."

"As a result, did you find anything new?"

"Yes. First, this."

He pulled a bullet from his pocket inside a plastic bag, which Prosecutor Horiuchi accepted.

"This bullet was newly discovered at the crime scene?"

"Yes."

"Please specify the exact location."

"If you head a bit east from where the body was found and climb the slope, you'll reach a road running north to south. Beyond that road is a dense forest, and that's where the bullet was found."

"Did you conduct any analysis on the bullet?"

"Yes. We compared the rifling marks on this bullet, along with those from the gun found at the scene and the bullet retrieved from the victim's body. In total, we analyzed the three rifling marks."

"And what was the result?"

Prosecutor Horiuchi asked confidently.

Now, answer, Investigator Yoshida. Deliver the crushing blow that will break this shorty prosecutor’s smug face!

"None of them matched."

Ripples of shock.

Ripples, murmurs, and chaos!

The courtroom instantly became a chorus of noise. At the same time, I mentally pumped my fist in triumph.

Everything had gone according to plan.

First, I made sure the same type of bullet used in this case was placed at the scene. Then, last night, under the cover of darkness, I drove out to Ryugu Dam and—using a bullet completely unrelated to this case, one that would be useless no matter how much they examined the rifling marks—I tossed it into the forest.

Knowing I was the defense attorney in this case, the police would have been on high alert at the crime scene. But no matter how much they were on guard, it would be impossible to check every single car passing through the dark mountain road in the dead of night. Let alone notice that a bullet had been thrown from one of those cars into the forest.

Of course, simply throwing the bullet wouldn’t have been enough. The police needed to find it.

That’s where my connection with Kageno came in. Through Kageno, I approached an investigator eager to make a name for themselves and gave them a little tip-off: "Around 9 AM today, check this specific area. You’ll probably find a crucial piece of evidence that no one has discovered yet."

The timing was deliberate, of course, to ensure that the evidence would surface during today's trial. And sure enough, Prosecutor Horiuchi fell right into my trap and presented it as evidence.

Oh, how it was worth the risk. According to the prosecution’s claims, both bullets found at the scene were fired from the same gun by the defendant. Yet, for some reason, the rifling marks on the two bullets didn’t match. This completely undermines the prosecution’s case. There’s no way they can prove this incident anymore.

Take that, shorty prosecutor. You've given me quite the headache this time, but now I can finally rest easy—secure in my lawyer's license—and look forward to my date tomorrow. My date—

"Order! I will have order! Anyone who does not comply will be removed from the courtroom!"

The judge banged his gavel repeatedly, restoring order to the courtroom.

…And that's when it happened. That's when I noticed something strange.

Something felt off.

A powerful piece of testimony had just been delivered that completely undermined the prosecution's case. So why hadn't I heard the usual "What!?" from Prosecutor Horiuchi?

I turned my gaze toward the prosecution's bench.

And there, sitting calmly as if he had foreseen all of this, was the shorty prosecutor.

"By the way, Mr. Yoshida—"

In that moment, a terrible premonition hit me.

"Why do you think a bullet that couldn't be found despite extensive searches was suddenly discovered so easily this time?"

"Well, there's a reason for that. Yesterday, I was approached by someone unknown to me. They told me, 'Around 9 AM tomorrow, check a little east of the crime scene, and you'll find some new evidence.'"

It felt like the skin on my face was peeling off like plaster—metaphorically speaking.

N-No way! No way, no way!!

"Do you know who this person was?"

"No. It seems like they were acting on someone else's instructions."

"I see. So, what did you do after hearing that?"

Yoshida puffed out his chest and replied,

"I couldn't possibly follow such shady instructions. I immediately reported it to my superior."

Hey, hey! What are you saying!? Don't you want the credit!?

"And what did your superior decide to do?"

"Well, it was highly suspicious that new evidence could be found at a scene we'd already thoroughly searched. And the fact that the tip-off came with a specific time made it even more suspicious. We suspected someone might be trying to fabricate evidence, so we immediately assigned personnel to keep watch near the crime scene."

Stop. Please, stop.

Don't testify any further. What's the point of dragging out this pointless testimony? A second bullet has already been found at the crime scene, and that completely overturned the prosecution's claims. Isn't that enough? Let's just stop the trial here. Why do we have to keep tearing each other apart in this meaningless way?

Ah, I want to object. But I can't.

And now, Yoshida's testimony was reaching its climax.

"So, Mr. Yoshida. Please tell us everything that happened after that."

"Yes. Last night—no, it was around 2 AM today. While we were staking out the area, a car approached. It was strange enough for a car to come at such an hour, but it was driving through the dark mountain road with its headlights off, and on top of that, it slowed down near the crime scene. We found this suspicious, and then suddenly, something was thrown from the driver's seat into the forest."

…It was probably a cigarette. Yes, that's it. It wasn't me. It wasn't me. It must have been someone who likes driving at night without headlights, who decided to smoke but realized they didn't have a lighter and threw the cigarette away in frustration.

…So, gallery members, could you please stop looking at me with such suspicious eyes?

"Did you find out what was thrown?"

"Unfortunately, it was too late at night, so we couldn't confirm at that time. However, thanks to a night-vision camera, we were able to capture the license plate of the car."

…

…He's bluffing, right?

"Do you have that photo with you?"

"Yes, it’s right here."

"Your Honor, this has no direct connection to the case, so we won’t submit it as evidence, but I’d like you to take a look."

With that, Prosecutor Horiuchi handed a photo to the judge—and then, smirking, he handed a copy to me as well.

What was in the photo was a sedan driving at night without its headlights on. And the license plate on that car was unmistakably—

"Mr. Yoshida, did you identify the owner of that car using the license plate?"

"Yes."

"Then, please testify to the owner’s name."

"The owner’s name is Mr. Zenko Yamashika."

…The gallery was engulfed in an unprecedented buzz.

The thick skin on my face was twitching harder than ever.

"Mr. Yoshida, that’s the same Yamashika who is sitting at the defense table, correct?"

"Yes. The same Mr. Yamashika who is sitting at the defense table."

A thought crossed my mind.

This time, I might really be done for.

"So, Mr. Yoshida, aside from that car, were there any other suspicious individuals passing by?"

"No, we kept watch from last night until this morning, and not a single other car passed by. It’s a quiet area to begin with, especially at this time of year."

"Then after Mr. Yamashika’s car passed suspiciously, the next morning—that is, this morning—you investigated the scene again, correct?"

"Yes, thoroughly. And this time, we found a bullet that we couldn’t locate during the previous investigation. Right around the area where something was thrown from Mr. Yamashika’s car."

Prosecutor Horiuchi looked at me.

His cheeks were twitching as if he was about to burst into laughter at any moment.

At this point, I was expecting a spectator, perhaps someone wrongfully accused by Horiuchi in the past, to suddenly rise up and attack him in a dramatic turn of events, but unfortunately, no such thing happened.

Hopeless. Overwhelmingly hopeless.

There's no way out of this, is there?

"Your Honor, I would like to submit this newly discovered bullet as evidence for the prosecution, but—unfortunately, it appears to be unrelated to this case, so I won't. However, I'd like these facts, along with my statement, to be entered into the record."

"…Very well."

The judge replied while glaring at me out of the corner of his eye. It almost looked like he had two horns sprouting from his head.

…This is bad. This time, I'm really not confident I can talk my way out of this. What kind of trick could possibly get me out of this mess? I never would have guessed they'd catch a photo of my car. Really, am I completely cornered?

But I didn't have time to regret.

Because Horiuchi's questioning wasn't over yet.

"Now then, Mr. Yoshida. Please recall, when you presented the bullet earlier, you said, 'First, this.' By saying 'first,' does that mean you found something else as well?"

"Yes."

…What?

"And what is that?"

"A bullet."

…What?

"What type of bullet is it?"

"It's the same type as the one found inside the victim's body."

"Where was it discovered?"

"Quite a distance away from where we found the previous bullet. We decided to re-investigate the crime scene just in case, in light of recent events."

"And that's when you found it? Did you perform any analysis on this newly found bullet, such as examining the rifling marks?"

"Yes."

"And what was the result?"

"The rifling marks matched the bullet found inside the victim's body perfectly."

…What? Wait, wait a minute. Does that mean—

"So, Mr. Yoshida, the bullet you found and the bullet found inside the victim's body were fired from the same gun, correct?"

"That's correct."

"The defendant fired two shots, one missed, and the other was found inside the victim's body. Therefore—this newly found bullet is the very first shot that the defense has been demanding all this time, isn't it?"

"That's the only conclusion we can come to."

W-What!?

What the hell!!

The bullet the police couldn't find—the one I had counted on, using it to scatter an unrelated bullet to undermine the prosecution's case completely.

But—it backfired. Because I planted the bullet and triggered a re-investigation, they ended up finding the real first bullet. What kind of rotten luck is this?

And the rifling marks matched the bullet found inside the victim's body. The prosecution's claims were fully supported, and now my tampering with the rifling is even more suspicious.

It's over. Completely over. There's no way out of this now…

"Your Honor, I submit this bullet as Prosecution Evidence G."

"Very well, it is accepted."

The judge didn’t even bother to check with me anymore.

Horiuchi, with a grin of triumphant satisfaction I had never before seen, announced the end of his questioning to the witness.

"Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Yoshida. That will be all."

But that’s when the unexpected happened.

"Huh?"

Yoshida suddenly spoke, his face surprised.

"Um, is that really… all?"

This time, it was Horiuchi’s turn to look confused.

"Yes, that’s all. Is there something wrong?"

"Well, um, you see, we found two bullets and also one casing at the scene, right? Aren’t you going to submit the casing as evidence?"

"…What?"

…What?

...

...

Casing? Wait, maybe he meant 'casings'… like 'sausages'?

"S-Sorry, what did you say? Were you having a barbecue or something?"

Horiuchi voiced the same question I had. It was a little sad that we were thinking the same thing.

"No, I mean the casing we found at the scene, along with the bullet."

So it wasn’t sausages. It was definitely a casing.

Hmm. So they found a casing along with the bullet.

But that’s strange. Why would a casing be lying around there? That doesn't make sense; the only thing I secretly threw into the forest was a bullet. That means there are currently three bullets in total. The defendant, Ebiyama, fired two shots, and the two casings from those shots should be securely held by the court. So a third casing shouldn’t exist… should it?

…

The bullets Ebiyama fired were two, and now there's a third casing at the scene.

No way.

Think calmly, me. The reason a third casing was found. I didn’t place it there. I can’t think of anyone else who would fabricate evidence.

In other words, that casing has been at the scene ever since the incident happened. It just hadn’t been found until now.

Which means—there’s only one reason why a third casing appeared!

“Y-Y-Your Honor!”

Suddenly, Prosecutor Horiuchi shouted. Apparently, he came to the same conclusion as I did.

“S-Something quite unexpected has occurred, so in order to properly grasp the situation and proceed smoothly with the trial, may I request a short recess?”

“Objection!”

I slammed my fist on the table immediately.

“A testimony has just been given and recorded about the discovery of a new casing! A recess is fine, but before that, it is the defense’s right to be allowed a chance for cross-examination!”

Judging from Horiuchi’s reaction, something unexpected must have happened for sure. What’s bad for the prosecution is good for the defense.

This is a chance. Probably my last chance to save my attorney’s license. I can’t let it slip away.

“Both of you, calm yourselves,” the judge, still maintaining his composure even at this stage, said. “Indeed, it seems something unexpected has occurred for the prosecution. However,

granting a recess without clarifying the recent testimony would be unfair to the defense. That said, moving directly to cross-examination also seems inappropriate. Therefore, in the interest of fairness, I will personally ask the questions."

Another one of those gray-area decisions... Well, fine. It's better than missing out on this testimony.

"Mr. Yoshida, please answer. You testified that a casing was found, correct?"

"Yes."

"Do you have the casing with you?"

"Yes."

"Please submit it. To prevent any unnecessary confusion, this evidence will be managed by the court. …Very well. Now, Mr. Yoshida, could you testify in detail about how this evidence was discovered?"

"Uh, yeah. Well, it's not really anything special. As I mentioned earlier, we thought Mr. Yamashika might have done something, so we re-investigated the scene this morning. That's when we found the casing, and then the bullet we submitted earlier…"

"Did you examine the firing pin marks on the newly discovered casing?"

"Yes, of course. We compared it with the two casings found at the scene and with the firing pin marks from the gun."

"And what was the result?"

"It didn't match the two casings found at the scene, but it did match the firing pin marks from the gun."

What!? Wait, what the hell does that mean!?

"I see. If I remember correctly, the firing pin marks on the two casings found at the scene were reportedly tampered with, but there was no mention of the gun's firing pin being altered. Therefore, it's reasonable to conclude that the casing was fired from the handgun submitted as Prosecution Exhibit A, correct?"

"Y-Yes, that's correct."

"Hmm, that's a rather curious turn of events… What exactly is going on?"

“Y-Y-Your Honor!” Prosecutor Horiuchi stood up. “There’s no need to hesitate; this is clearly a conspiracy! Mr. Yamashika must have planted the casing along with the bullet, that’s all there is to it!”

“But Prosecutor Horiuchi, doesn’t that seem strange? The newly found casing bears the same firing pin marks as the gun. I find it hard to believe the defense could have acquired such a casing.”

“Ugh, well, I—I’m sure the defense must have obtained it when he visited the crime scene or something! There’s no other explanation!”

“That’s also odd. According to your argument, there shouldn’t even be a third casing in the first place, should there?”

“Guh! But Your Honor! This defense attorney has a history of using borderline illegal methods to turn the courtroom into a circus and, in the midst of the chaos, get his clients acquitted! This is surely a trap he set to frame us! And let’s not forget, Your Honor, Detective Yoshida’s testimony clearly shows that the defense attorney was trying to fabricate evidence with the bullet! There’s no way he can talk his way out of this now. It’s high time we charged him with contempt of court!”

He’s trying to change the argument. But the judge didn’t point that out and instead glared down at me.

“Prosecutor Horiuchi’s argument has merit. There are still many unclear points regarding the newly discovered casing, but we should hear the defense’s side of the story to resolve this. Given the evidence and testimony presented so far, I, too, was inclined to apply contempt of court charges. Unless, of course, you have a reasonable explanation, defense counsel.”

Here it is. The final ultimatum.

I realized.

This is my last chance.

Detective Yoshida, whom I’d tried to help gain some credit, had betrayed me. And with photographic evidence of me being at the crime scene, there’s no way I can claim I didn’t plant the bullet. It’s utterly hopeless. Unless I can present a defense that convinces the judge, I won’t be able to avoid contempt of court. And if this trial concludes as it is, I’ll likely be charged with evidence tampering, lose my attorney’s license, and might even end up behind bars. I’ll officially join the ranks of life’s losers, never to walk under the sun again—

No, I won’t let that happen! I won’t let go of the power—the status—of being a lawyer, which I’ve worked so hard to gain!

Think, think, damn it.

This is my last chance. Yes, there's only one clue left: the casing that shocked Prosecutor Horiuchi so much. That's where the breakthrough must be.

Why was there a third casing in that spot? Why? I didn't place it there. Horiuchi didn't either. It's hard to imagine anyone else could have.

The defendant fired two shots. The casings from those two shots have already been found.

So, if a third casing was found, the reason must be—

Ping

That's when it hit me. My brilliant, golden brain cells suddenly lit up.

I've got it.

Heh heh heh, as expected, I'm a genius attorney. I'm the type who shows his true strength when cornered.

Let's set aside the reason for the third casing's existence for now. There's only one thing that matters. How to escape from this desperate situation where the charges of contempt and evidence tampering are almost certain, how to not only avoid losing my attorney's license but also prove my client's innocence with the ultimate—bluff.

Heh heh heh, I laughed. Quietly at first, then louder. Mocking Prosecutor Horiuchi.

"…D-Defense counsel? Is something wrong?"

"No, I apologize, Your Honor. I understand now. I'll explain in a way that makes sense. First—let me admit it. Yes, I did go to the crime scene last night and threw a bullet from my car. And I even informed one of the investigators so that they would re-investigate the scene and find the bullet."

The courtroom buzzed.

Even the judge was taken aback, his eyes widening in surprise.

“You—you admit it, defense counsel? You did such a thing?”

“Yes, I admit it. But, I had to do it in order to protect the rights of my client.

Why did I do such a thing? Before answering that, let me first speak about the casing that was submitted earlier. I did not place that casing. That casing, just like the second bullet the police found today, had been at the scene from the very beginning, but the police simply failed to find it!

And I had foreseen that such undiscovered evidence still existed at the scene! However, both the police and the prosecution claimed that all the evidence had already been found and refused to conduct any further investigation.

So, I deliberately threw a bullet at the crime scene late at night, and at the same time, informed the police about it! The reason is simple and clear: I wanted to force a re-investigation of the scene, to make them find the bullet and casing that had not yet been discovered!”

“Wha—WHAT!?”

Ooooooooooooooh!

The gallery erupted. No, it wasn’t just a stir. It was a roar of outrage. That defense attorney had thought this far ahead—?

Phew. For something I came up with on the spur of the moment, it seems to have been a fantastic bluff.

Now that I’ve gone this far, there’s no turning back.

With a self-satisfied smile, I continued.

“So, why did the third casing appear? There’s only one reason. We had been misunderstanding the situation all along. We thought only two bullets had been fired from the gun found at the scene. But that’s wrong. A third shot had been fired, and not even the defendant realized it!”

“D-Defense counsel,” the judge rasped, “if what you’re saying is true, then I can somewhat understand your actions… But, assuming three bullets were indeed fired, what does that imply? What exactly are you trying to argue?”

There was no turning back now. I had to trust my instincts, drawing on my experience from handling countless cases, and speak without thinking.

“The answer is clear, of course. Everything I do as a defense attorney is for my client’s sake. This case is no exception. I have only one thing to argue: the defendant is innocent! The person who shot and killed the victim is someone else!”

Is that true!?

“W-Who is this person, defense counsel? Who is the real culprit!?”

Don’t ask me that!

I wanted to yell at myself. Is there really a true culprit?

Ugh, whatever. I’ve already come too far to turn back now, so let fate take its course. Just for this moment, I’ll allow you to call me “Bluff Attorney.”

“Your Honor. Naturally, I intend to reveal the real culprit in this courtroom. However… well, Your Honor, there was that suggestion from Prosecutor Horiuchi about taking a recess earlier, wasn’t there? Now that the witness examination has reached a pause, though I’m not particularly eager about it, for Prosecutor Horiuchi’s sake, I think the defense would be willing to agree to a recess.”

“…What?”

<u>December 27th, 11:30 AM, Defense Waiting Room</u>

Phew. Once back in the waiting room, I finally relaxed the tension in my face.

Even if it was completely improvised, I somehow managed to escape a tight situation. At least for now.

I managed to get us a break. Whether or not there is a real culprit, during this short recess, I have to come up with a rational explanation no matter what.

But before that—I first decided to confront Kageno.

“Hey, Kageno, what the hell is going on!? The investigator you said you had a deal with betrayed us just like that!”

But Kageno, for his part, was completely unfazed by my protest. He casually stuck a pinky in his ear and started cleaning it.

“Hmph, how should I know? I just did what you asked me to do. I’m not responsible for anything beyond that.”

“That’s right, that’s right. From where I’m standing, your little schemes were full of holes from the beginning. It was obvious things would end up like this without me having to interfere!”

“W-What…”

Hearing that from a middle school brat was a real blow to my pride.

“What do you mean my plan was full of holes!? Tell me!”

“Heh, fine! I’ll tell you, so clean out your ears and listen carefully!”

Satsuki flicked her hair back and pointed sharply at me.

“Listen! First of all, until now, you’ve repeatedly done things for the sake of the trial that, no matter how you look at it, seem like crimes! Don’t you realize how much resentment you’ve built up with the prosecution and the police!? If you take some shady story to the police at this point, of course they’re going to suspect your involvement!”

“Ugh.”

“And on top of that, the investigator you had Kageno approach was someone who was desperate to score some points, right!? From their perspective, it’s much more of an accomplishment to nail some shady lawyer than to discover a single piece of evidence! Of course they’d betray you!”

“Wha-whaaaat!?”

W-what the hell.

It’s infuriating, but what this brat was saying made too much sense.

Of course, if they found evidence that could convict me, they’d be showered with rewards from the police and prosecution alike.

“Tch, there’s nothing I can do about it now. Well, there’s no point whining about what’s already happened. Just forget it. At least we’ve got the breakthrough with the third casing. Now, we just have to fabricate—no, find the real culprit.”

“You’re changing the subject,” the brat said.

“Yeah, you’re dodging it,” chimed in the lousy detective.

“Shut up, outsiders! Stay out of this!”

Damn it, I bet they don't even care about the desperate situation I'm in right now.

In the end, I can only rely on myself. I thought hard. The bullet-planting scheme had failed. Well, there's nothing I can do about that now. The real issue is the meaning of the third casing that was found, and whether there really is a true culprit.

No, it's not "whether there is." If I want to save my attorney's license, I have no choice but to assume that there is.

So let's assume there is a real culprit. But that raises several problems.

First, there's Akio Ebiyama's own testimony. He testified that in the middle of a struggle, he grabbed the gun from the dealer, Kaishiba, and fired two shots. Right after the second shot, Kaishiba went limp. On top of that, Ebiyama said he threw Kaishiba's lifeless body into the dam. In Kaishiba's case, his cause of death had nothing to do with drowning, so that's a minor point, but given the circumstances, it's reasonable to think Ebiyama killed him.

The bigger problem is the prosecution's argument. They claim that the second bullet grazed the victim's temple, ricocheted off a rock behind him, and then struck Kaishiba in the back.

Given the circumstances, it's not an impossible scenario. And they have three pieces of evidence to back it up.

First, the bullet didn't enter Kaishiba's back in a straight trajectory, but rather at an odd angle, as if it had spun vertically. The strange shape of the entry wound supports that.

Second, the bullet recovered from the body had marks indicating it had hit something before.

Third, there's a mark on the nearby rock at the scene that looks like it was caused by a ricochet.

Hmm, none of this adds up at all.

Speaking of things that don't add up, there's also the third casing that was found earlier. If we think about it simply, it would mean that someone else fired a third shot, separate from the two fired by Ebiyama. But there were only five bullets left: four in the magazine and one in the chamber. This gun holds seven bullets, and the numbers don't match.

Argh! Damn it, thinking about everything at once isn't going to solve anything. I need to tackle each problem one by one. For now, I decided to—call Ujigami. I pulled out my phone and dialed his number.

"…What is it, Bluff Attorney?"

Ujigami, who answered the phone, sounded as grumpy as ever.

"Ujigami, there's something I need to ask you."

"Do you even know what time it is? It’s a weekday, you know. Don’t call me during work hours. Civil servants are especially strict about these things."

"Lunch break is in thirty minutes, right? Just say you’ve got a stomachache or something and run to the bathroom."

"Don’t mess with me. Why should I do something like that for you? Anyway, I’m hanging up now. Goodbye!"

"Oh, so you won’t help a friend in need? Well, then I’ve got no choice. I really don’t want to do this, but I guess I’ll just have to ask your wife for help."

"…Hey, wait a minute."

"Your wife’s about to call your office soon, but hey, you two are a close couple, so I’m sure your boss won’t mind. Alright, talk later."

"Wait, wait, wait! Fine! I’ll answer whatever you want, so just keep your filthy tongue away from my wife! It’s disgusting!"

...

What exactly does this guy think of me? Whatever, this isn’t the time for that.

"If you’d just said that from the start, this would’ve been easier. So, what do you think? If you need to run to the bathroom, I can call you back in a minute."

"No, it’s fine. No bodies came in today, so it’s been quiet."

"What the hell! If you had the time, you should’ve just listened to me from the start!"

"Why should I do that for someone like you?"

Ughhhhhhhhhh.

Every time I say something, he’s got a clever retort… Why is it that I’m always surrounded by these twisted people!?

There’s an old saying: ‘He who lies down with dogs, rises up with fleas.’ At this rate, my own personality is going to get warped.

"Fine, fine. Forget it. Just answer my question. Here's the situation: I need to know what circumstances would create a long, narrow entry wound."

"…No, just saying 'here's the situation' doesn't explain anything."

"Figure it out! I don't have time to explain everything right now!"

"How am I supposed to figure that out!? If you don't have time, don't waste it on useless calls like this!"

"Damn it! Fine! You know what an entry wound is, don't you? An entry wound!"

"Yeah, I know. It's the wound a bullet makes when it hits someone's body."

"Exactly. And sometimes, instead of being round, the entry wound is long and narrow, like it was stabbed with a knife."

"Yeah, that happens. When a bullet ricochets and its trajectory gets distorted, it enters the body at an angle, either vertically or horizontally."

"So, it happens when the bullet ricochets?"

"Not necessarily. It doesn't only happen when a bullet ricochets. Bullets are surprisingly fragile, you know. Most of the time, they shatter into pieces when they hit something before they even have a chance to ricochet."

"R-Really!? So, ricochets don't happen that often!?"

"That depends on the type of bullet. For example, I saw on the news recently that the Tokarev bullets they found near some dam were made with a steel core and were designed to be quite tough. With bullets like that, ricochets can happen multiple times easily."

Damn. Now that you mention it, the bullets used in this case were exactly those sturdy ones.

"Alright, then. Are there any other causes you can think of?"

"There are plenty. Bullets are conical in shape, which makes them inherently unstable. If they don't spin perfectly straight as they fly, their trajectory shifts quickly. Even a bit of debris in the barrel can throw off the bullet's spin. Once the spin is off, the air resistance makes the trajectory deviate more and more as it flies. When that happens, it can hit the target at an angle, creating a long, narrow entry wound."

"I see… But if I said, 'There was debris in the barrel,' no one's going to believe me. Isn't there a simpler explanation?"

"You’re overthinking it. As long as the bullet encounters some resistance while flying, that’s enough. Even something like a gust of wind can do it. That’s the kind of thing you’re good at, right? Just make up something plausible."

…

…

As long as the bullet encounters some resistance while flying?

Resistance… Resistance…

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!!!"

"Shut up! Don’t scream into the phone!"

"Who cares about that! I’ve figured it out! I’ve figured out the truth of the case! Ujigami, answer one more question for me! Listen closely—"

—After asking Ujigami one more confirming question, I hung up the phone, feeling even more confident.

I got it. I understand now. I know the outline of the case. The real culprit is probably him.

But—the problem is how to confront him with this.

In any case, I don’t have enough information right now. I decided to question Kageno for now.

"Kageno, did you look into that detective Ikamura?"

"Yeah, I did. I even found out who hired him."

"Tell me."

"His client is a guy named Tadakuni Takoda. But the name doesn’t really matter here. You’ll know who I’m talking about when I tell you: he’s the guy who ran against Haruhiko Ebiyama in the same election and lost."

"I see. I figured it was something like that."

So, he was trying to dig up a scandal on Haruhiko Ebiyama, a member of parliament, aiming to damage his reputation.

"However, there's one thing that's bothering me. From what I saw in court, that detective Ikamura wasn't just showing ordinary loyalty. How did he come to be hired by Takoda in the first place?"

"Well, it's not about loyalty. It seems that he made a deal with Takoda: if he could find a scandal that would end Haruhiko Ebiyama's political career, he'd get a huge payout."

"Hmm. Now that you mention it, there was something about him shutting down his detective agency. So, he didn't want to risk his hard-earned reward by revealing his client's name, huh?"

"Yeah, that's probably it."

I see. That makes sense.

"By the way, he was limping when he took the witness stand. What was that about?"

"No idea. From what I looked into, there's no record of him having a leg injury."

"Hmm."

Now, what to do…

For now, I'll need to have Akio Ebiyama testify. It'll involve him giving a bit of false testimony again, but—well, if it leads to finding the real culprit and getting him acquitted, I'm sure Ebiyama will be satisfied. Plus, it'll mean I won't get nailed for perjury either.

Ugh, this whole thing is a mess of lies. I should probably reflect on this later. Even if only superficially.

Now, the problem is what comes next. Even if I can set the stage to confront that man, I don't have any reliable eyewitnesses or solid physical evidence to back it up.

Physical evidence. Evidence…

Wait a minute—speaking of evidence—

Let's assume, for a moment, that Akio Ebiyama isn't the real culprit. And let's also disregard the prosecution's theory.

	一発目の銃弾
検察の主張	外れた
俺の主張	外れた
薬莢の所在	現場で発見済み
銃弾の所在	今日の再捜査で発見

	二発目の銃弾
検察の主張	被害者に命中
俺の主張	外れた
薬莢の所在	現場で発見済み
銃弾の所在	行方不明。兆弾した可能性が高い

↓

じゃあこの銃弾は一体どこへ…？

	三発目の銃弾
検察の主張	三発目なんざ知らね
俺の主張	これこそが被害者に命中
薬莢の所在	今日の再捜査で発見
銃弾の所在	被害者の体内から検出

If we do that, then neither of the two bullets fired by Ebiyama hit the victim. The bullet that struck Kaishiba's back would have to be the third shot. The bullet casing that surfaced today—it likely contained that third bullet, the same one recovered from the victim's body.

The first bullet was found by the police today. So, where the hell did the second bullet go, the one we thought had hit the target all this time? The police searched the scene thoroughly after I urged them to. They even found the first bullet, which had eluded them until today. And yet, they never found the second bullet, which should have missed. Where the hell did it go?

There was definitely a mark on the rock at the scene that seemed to be from a ricochet. It's likely the second bullet ricocheted. Hmm. But with how much they searched the scene and couldn't find it, it's probably best to assume someone took it. Was it Ebiyama, Kanioka, or Ikamura?
But is it really possible for someone to find a bullet that ricocheted off who knows where and quietly take it?

"…Hmm."

Who knows where it went?

Wait. There is one possible hiding place.

But how do I prove it? No, wait! That's right, this is a courthouse. Which means… But… come to think of it, this trial has been going on for several days, and he's been coming here every day. That means—

My feet naturally started moving toward the door.

"Hm? Going somewhere, Zenko?"

"Yeah. I'm going to bring in a new witness."

"What? Now? Zenko, in five minutes the trial is going to start. You don't have time to go call a witness, do you?"

"Hmph, the witness I'm looking for—"

I was too impatient to open the door properly, so I kicked it open violently.

"Is right here, on the first floor of this courthouse!"

<u>December 27th, 1:00 PM, District Courtroom 3</u>

"Well then, Defense counsel. I trust you've had enough of a break, so could you call your witness promptly?"

The judge said, with about 40 percent sarcasm in his voice.

"Understood. The defense would like to call its next witness, the defendant, Akio Ebiyama."

The sudden appearance of the defendant caused a slight stir in the courtroom.

Now, will Ebiyama testify as planned? I gave him plenty of coaching, so I think it should be fine…

Once Ebiyama took the witness stand, I began questioning him calmly, so as not to put pressure on him.

"Now, Mr. Ebiyama. Do you recall the testimony given by your friend, Mr. Kanioka, the day before yesterday, and by the detective, Mr. Ikamura, yesterday?"

"Y-Yes."

"Do you acknowledge their testimony that you shot the victim while struggling with him?"

"Y-Yes, I do. But there's one thing I disagree with."

"And what's that?"

"Y-Yes. Kanioka… he testified that I tampered with the evidence under my lawyer's instruction. But after the incident I asked you, Yama—err, Mr. Yamashika, how investigations involving gun use usually proceed. After our consultation, I thought about it. If I went to the scene and erased the rifling marks and firing pin impressions from the gun and shell casings I left behind, I figured I wouldn't get arrested."

The courtroom buzzed, and Prosecutor Horiuchi turned pale.

"In other words, the evidence tampering was your own decision, correct?"

"Y-Yes, that's right."

"Then why did your friend, Mr. Kanioka, lie and say it was under my direction?"

"I don't know. I've already been betrayed by him. I have no idea what's going on in Kanioka's mind."

"No further questions."

Phew, I made him lie on the witness stand again.

One lie leads to another, and to protect those lies, you end up layering even more lies. I see now, lying is truly a bad thing.

But if lies lead to more lies, all you have to do is keep lying forever. If the truth starts catching up to the lies, just lie again. Eventually, the truth will get tired and fall behind. After all, lies are limitless, while the truth is always just one thing. It's a battle of numbers, and lies win.

Anyway, that takes care of one of the problems. Initially, I had him erase the rifling and firing pin marks to confuse the investigation, but now that we're revealing the truth, those alterations are just a hindrance. The shell casings and bullets found at the scene must have been fired from the gun found at the scene.

"Prosecutor Horiuchi, do you have any cross-examination?"

"…No, nothing in particular."

Horiuchi didn't object. Perhaps he's given up on charging me with evidence tampering related to the bullets and shell casings. Or maybe he's decided it's enough to be able to indict me for throwing the bullets at the scene. Either way, for Horiuchi, it's probably enough that the defendant has largely admitted to the testimonies of Kanioka and Ikamura.

The next witness I called was Detective Inaba.

"Detective Inaba, I have just one question for you. You testified that the Tokarev found at the scene had four bullets in the magazine and one in the chamber, making a total of five bullets, correct?"

"Yes."

"And that supports the claim that the defendant fired two shots, correct?"

"Yes, it does."

"Now, Detective Inaba. I understand that four bullets remained in the magazine, but what exactly does it mean that there was one left in the chamber?"

"…Oh, well, it's not a big deal. In the case of an automatic pistol like the Tokarev, when you pull the trigger, a bullet is loaded into the chamber from the magazine, and the gun fires. Since the loading process is automatic with each shot, if the seven-round magazine of the Tokarev fired

two shots, there would be four bullets left in the magazine and one in the chamber, for a total of five bullets left."

"I see. So, Detective Inaba, if I may rephrase what you just said: If there had been one round already loaded in the chamber at the start, and then seven bullets loaded into the magazine, there would have been eight bullets in the gun at the beginning, correct?"

"…Well, I suppose that's possible, but unless you're a soldier or police officer preparing for a firefight, I doubt you'd need to do that just for a simple test fire."

"I see. Now, Detective Inaba, do you recall Mr. Kanioka's testimony? He said that they were initially planning to test fire fifty rounds, correct?"

"Yes, that's what he said."

"Now, let's do some simple math. The Tokarev's magazine holds seven bullets. So, if you change the magazine seven times, that's seven times seven, which is forty-nine bullets. You're missing one to make fifty. But if you had one extra round already loaded in the chamber at the start, you get seven times seven plus one, which makes fifty. It saves some unnecessary effort, doesn't it?"

"W-Well, that might be true, but the victim was planning to extort money from the defendant. I don't think he would have gone through such careful preparations…"

"Indeed, the victim did extort the defendant. But all he did was demand more money than they had agreed on. Isn't it possible that the victim still intended to have the defendant fire the gun? After all, the victim had prepared more than fifty rounds, hadn't he?"

"W-Well, that might be true…"

"No further questions."

Once again, Prosecutor Horiuchi did not cross-examine.

"Next, I call Dr. Eboshi to the stand."

"Dr. Eboshi, you testified that the entry wound on the victim's back was not round, but long and narrow, and that it was caused by the bullet ricocheting, correct?"

"Yeh, that's correct."

"However, the cause of a bullet flying off course doesn't have to be a ricochet, does it?"

"Well, yeh."

"For example, a bullet's trajectory can be thrown off by something as simple as debris in the barrel or a gust of wind, right?"

"Yeh, that's true."

"Similarly, a bullet could be strongly deflected if it hit the surface of water, which could also cause the bullet to spin, correct?"

"Yeh, that's possible."

"Now, in this case, the victim was found at the bottom of a body of water. So it's entirely possible that the long, narrow entry wound was caused by a bullet fired at the victim while they were underwater, isn't it?"

"Y-Yeh, that's true, but the bullet recovered from the victim's body had marks on it that indicated it had hit something—"

"By the way, Dr. Eboshi. You testified that the bullet that hit the victim broke his ribs and entered his chest, where it lodged in the sternum at the front of his chest, correct?"

"Y-Yeh, well…"

"Now, Dr. Eboshi. If the bullet hit a rock before striking the person, the bullet should have traces of the rock's material on it, shouldn't it?"

"Y-Yeh, I suppose."

"So, in this case, how was it? Did the bullet recovered from the victim's body have any traces of rock material on it?"

"N-No, it didn't. But when a bullet enters the human body, it's common for such materials not to be detected. The bullet gets washed by the blood once it enters the body."

"I see. In that case, based on that, let me ask: can you distinguish whether the marks on the bullet came from hitting the rock or from hitting a bone?"

Dr. Eboshi's face changed colors, as if his veins were about to pop.

"N-No, well, um, I think life is full of all sorts of possibilities…"

That made no sense.

"So, you cannot tell whether it hit a rock or a bone. Is that correct?"

"Yeh, I suppose."

"Then why didn't you mention that possibility until now?"

"Well, it's just that, no one asked…"

"Understood. Now, next, I'd like to ask about the external injuries the victim suffered. It seems the victim had a blunt force trauma on his head, as if he'd been struck hard by something flat, correct?"

"Yeh, that's true."

"You testified that the injury likely came from the victim hitting his head on the ground while struggling with the defendant, didn't you?"

"Yeh, well…"

"But Dr. Eboshi. You can't say for certain that the injury was caused by the victim hitting his head on the ground, can you?"

"W-Well, um, I think life has its ups and downs, but…"

Has this doctor finally lost it?

"So, in other words, you have no basis to say that for sure, correct?"

"Yeh, I suppose."

"Then, Dr. Eboshi. For example—"

I moved closer to the witness stand and bent my right leg, showing the sole of my shoe to Dr. Eboshi.

"As you can see, the sole of a leather shoe is very flat. If, for instance, the victim's head had been kicked with this part, a similar injury could have been left, wouldn't you agree?"

"Eh?! W-Well, um, yeh."

"Then, my final question. You testified that the second shot grazed the left side of the victim's head, correct? Hypothetically, if a bullet traveling faster than the speed of sound passed close

enough to a person’s head to scrape the bone, it’s only natural to think the shock of that would cause them to lose consciousness, isn’t it?"

"…Err, well, yeh."

"And as anyone who’s watched a combat sports show knows, when a person’s head gets cut, blood flows out continuously, doesn’t it?"

"Err, well, yeh."

"So, let’s say this. Even if the second bullet fired by the defendant didn’t ricochet and hit the victim’s back, seeing the victim unconscious and bleeding heavily would make anyone think they had died, wouldn’t it?"

"W-Well, yeh, that’s a possibility in life, I suppose."

"No further questions. Prosecutor Horiuchi, your cross-examination."

"…No, I have nothing."

Perhaps his past experience was giving him a bad feeling. The sight of the shorty prosecutor’s anxious face was immensely entertaining.

"Then, defense counsel, who is your next witness?"

"Yes."

With this, the preparations were about eighty percent complete.

"The defense calls as its witness the detective who observed the incident, Mr. Ikamura."

Dragging his left leg as usual, Ikamura took the witness stand.

"Now, Mr. Ikamura. I’m sorry to put you on the spot like this, but—"

I glared at Ikamura and slowly pointed my finger at him.

"The true culprit of this case… is you, isn’t it?"

...What? Everyone in the courtroom was dumbfounded. Of course, the most surprised among them, aside from the shorty prosecutor, was Ikamura himself.

"W-What a ridiculous thing to say, defense counsel!"

The judge spoke up.

"It would indeed be very impressive if you could point out the true culprit, but I cannot overlook you accusing someone of being the criminal without any basis. Defense counsel, since you're making such a bold claim, I trust you have solid evidence to back it up?"

"Of course, Your Honor. Allow me to explain how the incident unfolded.

First, the defendant and his friend, Mr. Kanioka, met with the victim by the Ryugu Dam, and a struggle ensued. The defendant fired two shots, and, mistakenly believing he had killed the victim, threw the body into the dam.

This witness, who had been tailing the defendant, saw the entire ordeal. And Mr. Ikamura, after the two left the scene, you must have rushed over to the dam to check on the victim's condition.

But at that moment, you saw the victim begin to move again! In other words, the victim was still alive at that point!

You had been tailing the defendant, the son of a member of Parliament, in hopes of uncovering a scandal about his father. And this was your golden opportunity. If it became known that the son of a politician shot and killed someone, it would be the ultimate scandal to ruin the father. It would also be the perfect chance for you to show your client that you had delivered on your promise.

In other words, the victim couldn't be allowed to come back to life! He had to die, shot and killed by the defendant!

The victim, who had regained consciousness underwater, would naturally have tried to climb back onto land. But you were there, waiting for him. And what did you do? It's simple. In the darkness, as the victim struggled to crawl back onto land, you stomped on his head and forced him back into the water! For the victim, it must have been utterly terrifying. He lost consciousness, only to wake up in the water. And just as he desperately tried to climb onto land, someone stamped on his head.

As the victim struggled in the water, you pointed the Tokarev that had been left at the scene at him and pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit the water, its trajectory bent, and it struck the victim's back. That's what caused the long, narrow entry wound.

Then, you picked up the third shell casing that shouldn't have existed and threw it far from the scene before returning to report to your client. Although that casing was found today, of course. Now, Mr. Ikamura, is there anything wrong with what I've just said?"

Ikamura, who had been in a daze, suddenly burst out in anger.

"O-Of course there is! It's completely false, a total lie! Why would I be the culprit?!"

"Well then, let's hear your excuse."

"T-That's, um, first of all, even the defendant himself thought he had killed the victim and threw the body into the dam, right?! I witnessed the whole thing. Why would I need to go check the body afterward?!"

"Because you had a reason to confirm the victim's condition. You knew that neither of the two shots the defendant fired had hit the victim."

"W-What?! How can you say that for certain?!"

"Listen carefully. The bullet recovered from the victim's body was fired not by the defendant, but by someone else. In that case, both shots fired by the defendant missed and flew off somewhere. And today, the police discovered two new bullets. One of them was placed by me, but the other one was the first bullet the defendant missed. The rifling marks match, which proves it. So, if the second bullet fired by the defendant didn't hit the victim, where did it go? The police thoroughly searched the scene, but they still haven't found it. Which means the only logical conclusion is that someone took it. Now, who could that be?"

This was the moment. I pointed sharply at the witness stand.

"It was you, Mr. Ikamura! You took that bullet from the scene and tried to secretly dispose of it! No, that's not quite right. To put it precisely, you were forced to take that bullet from the scene and, even now, you haven't been able to dispose of it! And that's exactly what proves you're the culprit!"

"W-What are you talking about?! That makes no sense! If you've got evidence, show it already!"

I ignored Ikamura and turned toward the judge.

"Your Honor. I apologize for interrupting the questioning, but to answer the witness's doubts, I'd like to call one more person to the stand."

"…Do as you like. Who is this witness?"

"Yes, the security guard stationed at the entrance of this courthouse, Mr. Socrates Gard."

Ikamura, dragging his left leg, left the witness stand, and in his place stood a uniformed security guard.

Perhaps because he was suddenly called to such a place, he couldn't hide his confusion.

"Mr. Gard. You're a security guard here at the courthouse's entrance, correct?"

"Y-Yes."

"What kind of work do you usually do?"

"Well, in short, I check the visitors to make sure they're not bringing in anything dangerous, that sort of thing."

"How do you conduct those checks?"

"Well, it's similar to an airport. We use infrared cameras to inspect their bags, and they walk through a gate equipped with a metal detector."

"Now, I've heard that for the past three days, the same person has triggered that metal detector, correct?"

"Uh? Yes, there was such a person."

"Could it have been—that man over there?"

I pointed to Ikamura, who had returned to the gallery.

"Yes, it was him. After three days in a row, I certainly remembered his face."

"Why did he keep triggering the metal detector?"

"Well, apparently, he injured his leg and had some metal parts implanted in it. We did a physical check, and there was nothing suspicious, so we let him through, but…"

The security guard nervously glanced around.

"Did I… make some kind of mistake? I-I have a wife and two kids, and they depend on my salary, so, um—"

"No, Mr. Gard. You've done nothing wrong. You're free to return to your post."

…After this, at my request, Ikamura once again took the witness stand. His face now looked utterly drained of life.

"Mr. Ikamura. I think you already understand what I'm getting at. The second bullet fired by the defendant ricocheted off a rock and struck your left leg, while you were hiding near the scene! That's why you knew the victim wasn't killed by gunfire! You had no choice but to take the bullet from the scene! But you couldn't tell anyone—not even a hospital—about it, could you? If you did, everything would've come to light. Besides, you probably thought your own body was the perfect hiding place, where no one could find it.

That's why the bullet that hit your leg is still inside you! That's why you kept triggering the metal detector! If you still think what I'm saying is nonsense, then feel free to refuse. I know a doctor, and I'd be happy to have them examine the injury in your left leg.

And that's not the only proof that you're the culprit. You may not know this, but no matter how much you wash away blood, it leaves traces invisible to the naked eye. And wherever there's a blood reaction, there's always a small amount of DNA left behind. With modern technology, even the tiniest bit of DNA can be cultivated and amplified. You kicked the victim's head with all your might as he tried to crawl back onto land. As a result, the victim bled slightly from the head. Mr. Ikamura. As evidence, I'd like you to offer your shoes. We'll be taking a DNA sample from them, which will likely belong to the victim."

"……Hmph."

There was no more room for excuses.

After a few moments of silence, Ikamura let out a long sigh and began to speak, almost reflectively, like a hardboiled detective.

"Could I… get a cigarette?"

"No, smoking is prohibited in the courtroom."

With the judge's merciless response, Ikamura slumped his shoulders at the witness stand. Alongside Prosecutor Horiuchi.

That was the signal that this trial had come to an end.

終章

とある共産主義者の悪あがき

Epilogue: The Desperate Struggle of a Certain Communist

At that moment, I was feeling very dissatisfied.

Half a day had passed since the trial ended.

Zenko, who had quickly wrapped up the post-trial formalities, was calling Yukina with a slovenly grin on his face.

"Oh, I see, you saw it on the news, huh? Nah, it wasn't such a big deal. For me, a murder case like that is nothing—I can handle it before breakfast."

Gwahahaha, Zenko's crude and vulgar laughter echoed.

On the other hand, Yukina's faint voice coming from the receiver sounded somewhat happy.

"More importantly, Yukina, about tomorrow… Oh, really? That's good! Yeah, of course, I'm fine too. I've been running around dealing with the aftermath until now just for that. Huh? What's going to happen to Ebiyama from here on? Well, for now, the murder charges have been dropped, so he's cleared of that. There are still unresolved issues like the firearms law and excessive self-defense, but as far as I'm concerned, I'm done with it. After all, his dad's a member of Parliament, so they can just hire another lawyer. It'll work out somehow. So yeah, no more problems on my end. …Yeah, that's right. So, how about we meet in front of the station at ten tomorrow?

Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it too!"

With that, Zenko finally stopped dragging his filthy tongue over Yukina.

This is strange. How did things end up like this?

The plan I set in motion should have been flawless.

That evening when the three clients visited the office, I secretly approached that timid-looking man, Kanioka, who seemed to have just been dragged into this mess, and whispered to him:

"Hey, don't you think it's ridiculous that you're getting caught up in all this trouble for some spoiled son of a politician? Listen, if things go on like this, you'll end up having nightmares about the corpse sinking to the bottom of the dam every time you try to sleep, and you'll live in constant fear every time you hear the sound of a police siren. You don't want that, do you? Then you should confess everything and free yourself. Don't worry, there's a system called judicial

bargaining nowadays, and if you voluntarily come forward, you won't end up in a bad spot. Besides, that lawyer you've been consulting with? The police hate him. So, if you give them something to use against him, they'll be more than happy to strike a deal."

Sure enough, Kanioka followed my advice and betrayed Zenko and the others.

Throwing him under the bus like this, Zenko's lawyer's license would be going up in smoke, and I would be able to fully enjoy watching him writhe in agony.

However—even someone like Zenko managed to pull through. Before I knew it, things were swept under the rug, and by the time I realized it, the trial was almost over.

How strange. This time, I was certain it was the end for him.

And so, Zenko ended up preparing for his date without a hitch.

If I let him go on a date with Yukina like this, everything I've done over the past week will have been for nothing. To protect Yukina's purity, I have to act now.

"Hey, you little brat over there."

At that moment, Zenko called out to me.

"…What do you want, Mr. Bluff Attorney?"

"It's already eight o'clock. I'm going to bed early to prepare for tomorrow, so you should get lost, kid."

"Hmph. I guess I have no choice."

A flash of inspiration struck me.

I obediently followed Zenko's words and went to the adjacent room to put away the teacup I had been using. In that room was the bed Zenko used, and next to it sat an alarm clock. It was an analog, ordinary kind of alarm clock. However, fortunately, this clock didn't have a second hand.

Now, the date tomorrow is at ten in the morning.

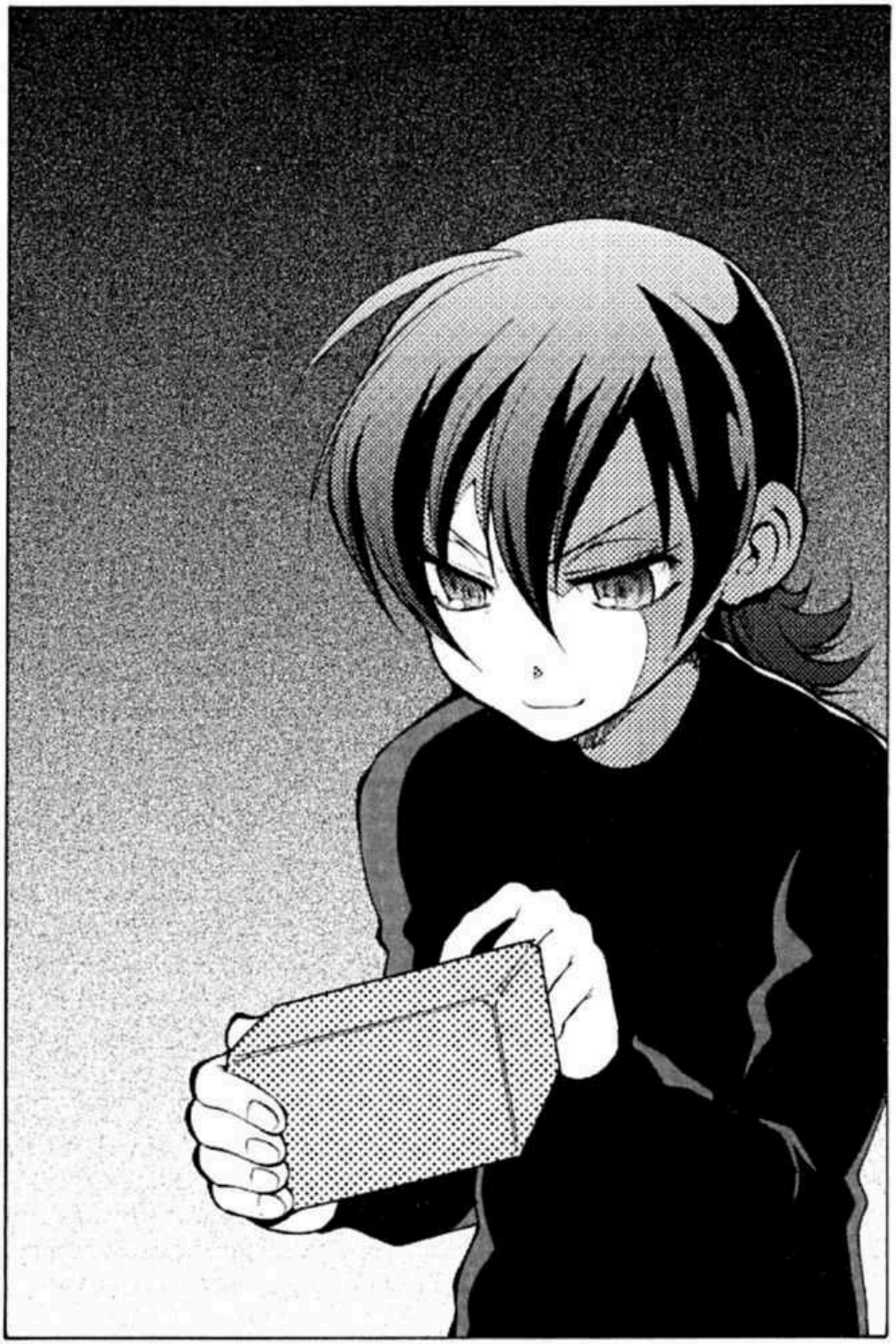
Zenko hadn't slept much since last night, and he spent the entire day talking during the trial, then ran around dealing with the aftermath afterward.

By now, he must be overwhelmed by sleepiness. It's eight o'clock now, so in about an hour, he'll surely go to bed.

Now then, here’s the question. Is there anyone who can immediately tell at a glance whether a clock without a second hand is actually working? Especially when they’re being overtaken by sleepiness?

And so—I mercilessly removed the battery from the clock and set the time to 9:00, the time Zenko would likely fall asleep.

Well then, that should do it.



Afterword

It's Toru Shiwasu.

After I sent the afterword for the previous volume to the editorial department, my editor, Mr. S, said to me:

"Lately, don’t you think you’re starting to resemble Zenko? Or maybe Zenko is turning into you?"

It’s really offensive to be compared to someone like him. I'm Shiwasu…

Now that the trivial stuff is out of the way, how was 'Tactical Judgment Volume 8' for you?

For me, this book was a rare case in which I didn’t have to send an email to Mr. S saying, "I'm going on a journey, don't try to find me," and the writing process went relatively smoothly. What’s more, it also made it through the checks by Mr. S and the mystery editor-in-chief, Mr. T, without a single revision, making it an exceptionally rare work. I just hope that you, dear readers, enjoyed it as well.

Now, changing the subject rather abruptly, as some of you may already know, the "Strongest Character Fair" has started this month. Essentially, this is a collaboration between five major publishers under the Kadokawa Group—Fujimi Fantasia Bunko, Mystery Bunko, Sneaker Bunko, Dengeki Bunko, and Famitsu Bunko—each of which has chosen a representative work to participate in this event. And somehow, this book was selected as the representative for Fujimi Mystery Bunko. They've even decided to reprint the previous volumes of the series, so if you’ve been having trouble finding 'Volume 1 of the Short Story Collection', now might be a good time to visit your local bookstore—you’ll have a higher chance of finding it.

Furthermore, including the short stories, this 'Tactical Judgment' series has now reached its tenth volume.

The fact that the series has reached this milestone, as well as being selected for the "Strongest Character Fair," is all thanks to the passionate support of you, the readers. The publishing industry remains a challenging environment, with new labels constantly appearing, and to have been able to release this many books, and to be selected for such a major event, leaves me at a loss for words of gratitude. I am acutely aware of the weight of the responsibility I’ve been entrusted with.

Though it may be a daunting task for a young writer like me, I will continue to do my utmost to meet the expectations of all of you. I humbly ask for your continued support.

Additionally, I would like to once again express my deepest gratitude to my editor, Ms. S, the mystery editor-in-chief, Mr. T, and everyone at Fujimi Shobo's editorial department. And of course, many thanks to Mr. Tomo Hirokawa, who always draws the illustrations with great care, no matter how demanding my requests may be. I ask for your continued guidance and support in the future as well.

Now, regarding the next volume of 'Tactical Judgment', it seems that the long-awaited moment when Mr. Yamashika will finally be arrested is approaching. However, since I haven't decided on the actual content yet, it might end up turning into a story where "a kid comes along, pays a dollar, and hires Yamashika"—something you've probably heard somewhere before.

In any case, please look forward to 'Tactical Judgment Volume 9', tentatively titled "The Day the Prosecutor's Office Dances in Madness."

I hope to see you again around springtime.

Toru Shiwasu

P.S.

As you may know, Fujimi Mystery Bunko has produced several hit works, and some of you (myself included) may be wondering why 'Tactical Judgment' was chosen for such a grand fair amidst all the competition.

There's actually a clear reason for this. Apparently, when Mr. T, the mystery editor-in-chief, heard about this joint fair over the phone, he misheard "Strongest Character Fair" as "Sinister Character Fair."

And, well, when you think of "sinister," there's that one character who's always doing things that seem like blatant criminal activity, right? So that's how it was decided. It was a conclusion that both I and Mr. S could accept.

Furthermore, I have one major announcement.

All the works selected for the "Strongest Character Fair" from the various bunko labels—starting with Mr. Tsukiji's "Maburaho" as the representative of Fantasia Bunko—are works that are getting anime adaptations.

And yet, for some reason, there's still no talk whatsoever of turning 'Tactical Judgment' into an anime.

Why is that? I'm so disappointed.

One final apology.

To the security guard at a certain local courthouse:

I promise I will never again walk through the gate with a round keychain or a bunch of coins stuffed in my pocket on purpose, so please, I beg for your understanding.

*TL Note: in the original book, pictures 15 (Kanioka being nervous?) and 20 (Zenko doing the Finger Pointing™) are switched. That doesn't make much sense to me, so I placed them in the order you saw earlier. Also yes, in the original, Mr. Socrates Gard's name "Keibi In" (啓日韻) reads the same as "keibiin" (警備員), i.e. "security guard"

師走トオル

しわすとおる●埼玉県在住。『タクティカル・ジャッジメント』で第2回富士見ヤングミステリー大賞準入選に選ばれる。同作にて作家デビュー。その後、新シリーズ『がらくたのフロンティア』を発表。ゲームと名のつくものなら、なんでも大好き。特技・おやじギャグ。弱点・スギ花粉。最近は山にも登る。

BOOK☆WALKER